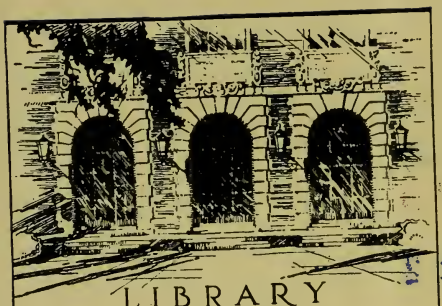

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THE

MAN OF FORTUNE,

AND

OTHER TALES.

BY MRS GORE,

AUTHORESS OF 'MRS ARMITAGE,' 'STOKESHILL PLACE,' ETC.

herine Grace Frances (Moody) Gore

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

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THE MAN OF FORTUNE.

CHAPTER I.

"For solitude to virtue proves a grave;
A sepulchre in which the living lie,
Till all good qualities grow sick and die."

COWPER.

SIR GILES CRESSINGHAM, in his youth a spendthrift and a roué, had become in his age something almost amounting to a miser. Not merely as regarded money;—nay, according to general interpretation, not as regarded money at all; for he was liberal in his house-keeping, and scrupulous that his old family mansion at Stoke Paddocks should exhibit all the state, if not all

535173

the hospitality, which it displayed under the dominion of his ancestors.

But the old gentleman was chary of his conversation, chary of his affections; miserly with his mind, miserly with his heart. The hollowness of the world, the superficiality of mankind, had inspired him with general mistrust, by the influence of egotism, creating a complete egotist.

"They never cared much for me," mused Sir Giles, "when I was young, cheerful, and good-looking. How can they be attached to me, now that I am old, infirm, and peevish? No, no! their civilities are addressed to my strong box. My relations pay their court to me only because they want to figure in my will. We shall see, we shall see!—In the meantime, I shall take care that they do not figure at Stoke Paddocks."

The fine old gardens of the place were consequently kept up for the recreation of the chaffinches and sparrows. It was only occasionally, on a very serene July afternoon, that the old gentleman could bear his Bath chair to be rolled out upon the lawn, to be stationed under a drooping beech-tree; under which he enjoyed

precisely the same reveries he would have enjoyed by the fire-side. As a youth, Sir Giles had been remarkable for his shyness,—as a man, for his absence of mind;—and now, in his decrepitude, cold, proud, selfish abstraction had taken place of all other faculties. His feeble spirit, within the intrenchments of an equally feeble body, was keeping up a perpetual warfare and defiance against the mass of mankind. He was always on his guard against them; always inwardly intent upon the unobserved discomfiture of their stratagems and manœuvres.

Surrounded by venerable servants, whose life had been a system of deference, as *his* of despotism, a perpetual Ko-too waited upon his nod. —There was no hope of his extending his sphere of virtue or enjoyment.—There was no one to suggest that so rich a man as Sir Giles might be wiser or happier. When he issued his decrees, his household obeyed in breathless submission. A simultaneous bow actuated the whole brigade whenever he was pleased to express an opinion. It was clear enough to others besides the vicar of the parish, that it would be easier for a camel to

go through the eye of a needle, than for such a man to enter into the kingdom of heaven.

It is probable that, had the splendid property of Sir Giles Cressingham been entailed, a vast difference would have been operated in his character. As a life enjoyment, he would have prized his fortune only as he prized the food that ministered to his hunger, or the garments that preserved him from the cold. But absolute power creates the absolute prince. To dispose of Stoke Paddocks and his other fine estates after his death, had been the grand consideration of his life — the great object of his reveries under the beech-tree and by the fire-side. Had it formed an agreeable object, this would not have signified. But unluckily it was a source of pain and anguish to the narrow-minded Sir Giles. In addition to the usual jealousy of his successor, he was disturbed by peculiar misgivings and antipathies in his choice.

His nearest relatives were cousins, the sons of uncles who had tormented him with advice and interference in his youth. He hated the whole pack of them. They were the Master Goodchilds who had been set up as examples to his boyhood.

Of their children he knew nothing, he wished to know nothing, chiefly because their injudicious parents were always tormenting him with letters concerning their merits and proficiencies; insulting him with a sight of their copy-books, their themes, their school-prizes, and college distinctions. Sir Giles resented all this, less as a legacy-trap than as a personal insult, intending to twit him with his folly in having refrained from matrimony; and his destitution, in his having no son of his own to write Latin exercises, and take honours at the University.

By degrees, his dislike assumed the morbid virulence of animosity. He could keep his troublesome relations out of his house, by ceasing to invite them. But even *his* absolutism was unavailing against the intrusions of the post. They could write to him when they pleased; and write they did, with a pertinacity that seemed expressly intended to harass and annoy. As he never answered them, he was in hopes that his dogged silence would in the end wear out their perseverance. By no means!—They only wrote the more, to inquire why he never wrote. At length, in his feverish irritation, he ceased to open

their letters. He was familiar with their several hand-writings. He had an intuitive perception of a cousinly letter, by the very manner of its folding; and there was a large drawer in his old-fashioned secrétaire, to which, for the last ten years, he had consigned every note and epistle that bore evidence of emanating from any branch or offset of the family of Cressingham. He almost allowed himself to rejoice on the arrival of one of these family missives, written on black-edged paper, and closed with a mourning seal.

Meanwhile, the last will and testament remained unengrossed, and the lands and tenements of Stoke Paddocks undevised. Sir Giles Cressingham appeared to conceive, that, by evading the question of inheritance, he might baulk his inheritors; — thus, though the most absolute of men, waiving his own right of disposal over his property, in favour of that of the law! It is recorded of one of the proudest of modern aristocrats, that when the approach of death was announced to him by his physicians, he caused his carriage to be ordered, went out airing, and died on the road, as if from a sort of vague conviction that the King

of Terrors might be conquered by defiance, that it was possible to be "not at home" to Death!—In the same spirit, Sir Giles appeared to imagine that the non-appointment of an heir secured him from a successor to his property.

There were moments, however, when announcements in the newspapers of the decease of his contemporaries, seemed to shake his nerves and excite his anxieties, by reminding him that even so rich a man was merely mortal. At such periods, his reveries under the beech-tree became, if not of a more sorrowful, of a more sullen complexion. He seemed to grudge the succeeding generation, manifested through the vista opened by those insolent obituaries, their enjoyment of the verdant lawns and noble woods around him. Every year added something to the beauties of Stoke. Money did much, and nature more, to enhance the glories of the scenery. The timber grew more majestic; fresh springs, bursting into the lake, perfected its margin; and rare exotics were added to the conservatory, and finer fruits to the garden, by the operation of horticultural art. It was only the master of all these enjoyments who was declining; it was only Sir Giles

who found himself the worse for the lapse of succeeding years.

Whenever all this occurred to him, he could have found it in his heart to exterminate every cousin of them all. As a last effusion of malice, he would have adopted some low-born stranger, in order to disappoint his expectant kith and kin, had his household dependency presented any youthful scion certain to survive him. But the abject slavishness to which he reduced those connected with him, had prevented all idea of matrimony from entering even his steward's room. His old housekeeper was a spinster, and his butler a gay bachelor of sixty-two. The whole establishment was as lonely, selfish, and discontented as himself.

It happened that one morning, in the midst of one of these fits of gloomy moroseness on the part of the old man, his peculiar appetite for the perusal of that grievous department of newspaper intelligence, headed "ACCIDENTS AND OFFENCES," brought under his notice the affliction of a widow lady of the name of Blair, whose only child, a boy about four years of age, had fallen out of a window, to the endangerment of life and limb. Mrs Blair (it appeared from the paragraph in the 'Courier'

which described the sad event) resided at Reading; and Sir Giles, remembering that the seat of his cousin Richard Cressingham, whose only daughter had run away with a Captain Blair, was situated within a mile of that town, had reason to suppose that a real family affliction had overtaken one of the objects of his antipathy.

In the listlessness of his leisure, he even opened the drawer containing the denounced Cressinghamian epistles; and having selected those which bore the postmark of "READING," proceeded carelessly to break the seal, anxious to ascertain for a certainty that Richard Cressingham was visited by misfortune.

His amiable solicitude was rewarded. The letters in question, a hoard conglomerating for the last six years, contained the whole history of his kinsman's domestic vexations; first, in the refusal of his only daughter to give her hand to his near neighbour and friend, the Earl of Ashleigh; secondly, in her elopement with a penniless captain in the Guards; and, thirdly, in the death of the bridegroom within a year of the marriage, leaving an infant son to his portionless widow. Had Sir Giles previously conjectured

for a moment that the correspondence of his aspiring cousin conveyed intelligence of so many personal mortifications, the letters would not have been allowed to remain so long unopened!

"I have resolved, and I have communicated my resolutions to Sophia," said Mr Cressingham's last letter, "never to receive her again into my house, unless she consent to remit the child to his father's relations;—who, it appears, are willing to burthen themselves by its adoption. To a childless widow, twenty years of age, it is far from improbable that Lord Ashleigh might be tempted to renew his addresses. At present, she remains as obstinately attached to the child as she was to its father. But I am not without hope that the severe distress to which she is reduced, will eventually prevail over her obstinacy. Purely to annoy me (though she pretends to talk about attachment to the scenes and friends of her youth), Mrs Blair has thought fit to take up her abode in lodgings at Reading. But as you may suppose, my dear sir, this does not accelerate, by a single step, her reception under my roof, except upon the terms I have proposed to her acceptance."

"Unnatural brute!" was the ejaculation of one

of the least amiable of the human race, at the conclusion of his cousin's letter. "I always detested Dick Cressingham, even more than his brother. Had it not pleased God to remove the child, it should be all the better for its grandfather's disgusting inhumanity."

It was so long since the old man's feelings had been touched by anything beyond the limit of the park-palings of Stoke Paddocks, that he could not forbear reverting again and again to the subject, till he began to interest himself seriously in the fortunes of Mrs Blair and her boy. He reconsulted the ACCIDENTS AND OFFENCES, and even the obituary of the Courier, for further intelligence concerning the unfortunate child; and at length worked himself up into such a state of nervous excitement, as to resolve upon despatching one of his grey-headed confidentials secretly to Reading, to ascertain the sequel of the event. It was only a journey of forty miles. A journey of forty miles was nothing for the chance of an opportunity of thwarting Richard Cressingham.

The old butler, to whom absence from Stoke was an event as rare and almost as exhilarating as tidings of family mischance to his master, re-

turned in a couple of days so cheered and gratified by his journey, that all he had seen and all he could imagine of the widow Blair and her offspring, was painted in the most glowing colours. The relief he had experienced in emancipation from the thraldom of his tyrant, was attributed to admiration of so fine an example of maternal devotion and patient resignation, as the lovely Mrs Blair; and of the promising little Reginald, of whom the newspapers had exaggerated the danger, but of whom it was impossible to exaggerate the spirit and beauty. Old Matthews vowed he had never beheld so fine a little fellow. He even added certain arabesque touches to the picture as to the resemblance borne by little Reginald to one of the ancestral portraits of the Cressingham family, in which a likeness had always been found, by his flatterers, for their present representative.

"It was very prettily thought of in Mrs Blair, to name her son after her great grandfather, Cressingham!" muttered Sir Giles, who, but for the idea that this selection on the part of the young widow was probably most unacceptable to her father, would certainly have liked the boy the less for so presumptuous a manifestation of his

family connexion.—"'Reginald Blair!' why not 'Reginald Cressingham?' — nothing would be easier than to effect the change of name, if I should find, hereafter, that the old fool Matthews has not bamboozled me by his account of these people."

The first step taken by the old man towards the verification of his butler's statements, was to fit up, with simple elegance, a small house situated on the outskirts of his park, which, in the time of his father, Sir Reginald, had been the residence of a favourite sister. By the beginning of summer, The Wilderness presented the very type of "a cottage of gentility;" and already the scheme so far prospered, that the interest excited in his mind by the progress of improving and furnishing, had considerably abated the habitual hypochondriacism of the peevish Sir Giles. Every day, he proceeded in his garden chair, at a snail's pace, from the Hall to The Wilderness, to ascertain that the new carpets were put down and the gravel walks properly rolled; and by the time the butler was despatched a second time to Reading, no longer incognito, but as bearer of authentic cre-

dentials and harbinger of the family coach and four that was to arrive the following day, Sir Giles Cressingham was at least ten years younger in health and temper than he had been ten weeks before.

CHAPTER II.

"He gave him, first, his breeding;
Then showered his bounties on him like the hours
That, open-handed, sit upon the clouds,
And press the liberality of heaven
Down to the laps of thankful men."

BEN JONSON.

LET it not be inferred that, because the cousinly epistle conveyed by Sir Giles Cressingham's butler to Mrs Blair, drew tears from the eyes of the widow, it contained the remotest allusion to his projects for the benefit of little Reginald.—The prudent baronet, anxious to judge for himself of the dispositions of both mother and child, simply expressed his regret that, in the period of distress following the untimely decease of her husband, she had not made known her troubles to one so nearly connected with her as himself; and proposed that she should spend a

month or two at Stoke Paddocks, by way of change of air for the little invalid.

The tears of Mrs Blair were produced by the bitter reflection that, had the letter addressed by her early in her widowhood to Sir Giles, not asking pecuniary aid—of that she was incapable—but imploring his intercession with her father, reached its destination, she might perhaps have been spared the sufferings of three years of sorrow and destitution. It was impossible for her to guess that, so far from missing its destination, that very letter lay unopened among fifty others, in a drawer of the old man's secrétaire; or that, even if the touching appeal had met his eye, not all the eloquence of all the best epistolary authorities in Europe, would have induced him to address a syllable of conciliation to his cousin Dick.

Gratefully, meanwhile, did she accept the baronet's friendly invitation to Stoke. Change of air had in truth been ordered for the boy, who was slowly recovering from the effects of his accident; and it touched her to the soul that while, in her cruel visitations, her own father had not deigned to testify the slightest sympathy, though con-

stantly passing the door of her humble lodging, a kinsman, comparatively a stranger, should exhibit such generous compassion towards the little sufferer. Sir Giles's invitation came with a double grace that it seemed more especially directed to her child.

Mrs Blair, severely humbled by the bitter woes of adversity, was more overpowered than gratified by the demonstrations of respect with which the head of the house of Cressingham chose to dignify her removal to his family seat. It was his pleasure that Richard Cressingham should hear of the family coach and outriders filling the narrow back street inhabited by the widow, with the glare of their liveries; but it was far from *hers* that her poorer neighbours should be dazzled by a spectacle of such undue magnificence. Even the little boy was more amazed than delighted by the multitude of strange faces that clustered round him by way of escort to his new abode.

That new abode appeared, however, an earthly paradise both to the mother and her child. Poverty is never more oppressive than when endured in the confinement of a town. The infancy of little Reginald had been spent in a

close lodging-house, the abode of poor Sophia's old nurse, who officiated as their only servant; and to possess a garden of his own,—a garden where he might play or work at his own good pleasure,—a garden full of flowers and fruit,—a garden where the sun shone and the birds sang,—was happiness enough for the boy!

His mother's enjoyments at The Wilderness were of a still higher order. Books and musical instruments awaited her there, — *her*, so long estranged from the habits of refinement derived from birth and education. While the boy wondered in silence that his mother should weep to find herself proprietress of an elegant drawing-room, lavishly adorned with the minor luxuries of life, he little thought she was grieving anew for his father, as on the day of his death.—It was precisely in such a house she had indulged the girlish dream of passing her life in the society of Harry Blair! And they had been fated to spend only a few needy harassed months together,—persecuted by the animosity of those who called themselves their friends!

It was surprising how complete a regeneration of nature was wrought in old Sir Giles by the

concoction of the first project of his long life not exclusively relating to himself. As some gnarled and twisted old thorn-tree sends forth leaves and blossoms in the sunshine, he had found taste, he had almost found poetry, in his soul, for the embellishment of a home destined to the enjoyment of youth and beauty. In that fair widowed cousin and her young child, he beheld objects so differing from himself, that he seemed to understand the necessity of providing pleasures for them utterly foreign to *his* powers of enjoyment; and had taken pains and pride in the prodigality of his arrangements for their comfort.

All the money, all the time, all the thought, however, which he bestowed upon these preparations, were a thousand-fold repaid by pleasure derived from their arrival. They were the first living things, both young and beautiful, that, for many years past, had embellished the desolation of Stoke Paddocks;—and the old man and all his inmates regarded them with something of the admiration due to celestial beings.

The child, more especially, became an object of idolatry in the house. All his little expressions were cited as wonderful, — all his movements

noted as admirable. He was a plaything to the second childhood of the old people,—an idol for their worship. No son and heir was ever more devoutly welcomed in a childless house! Toys, pets,—a pony,—a miniature gun, were provided for him; and when he only ran impetuously across the lawn of The Wilderness to greet Sir Giles, or sported carelessly upon the banks of the lake, the hitherto listless baronet became convulsed with alarm lest any evil should betide the lovely boy.

"You should be more careful with him, madam;—you ought to observe stricter discipline with him, my dear Mrs Blair,"—he would peevishly exclaim to the tender mother. "After the great peril to which he has been alread exposed by want of proper vigilance, you cannot be too much on your guard."

At the expiration of the two months specified for their sojourn at Stoke, instead of sanctioning their departure, Sir Giles Cressingham made a formal proposition to Mrs Blair to abandon her residence at Reading, and adopt The Wilderness as her future home; and if he did not at present more distinctly allude to his intentions in favour

of Reginald, it was only because he was now becoming sufficiently acquainted with Sophia's peculiar delicacy of mind, to fear that mistaken notions of duty towards her father might determine her to refrain from unduly promoting the interests of her son at the expense of those who had nearer claims upon the property.

Even at the close of a year, even at the close of two, Sir Giles had not committed himself by positive engagements. Already he exercised over Mrs Blair the sort of quiet tyranny which made slaves of all depending upon him.—Though far from anticipating, or even desiring, the adoption of the child to the exclusion of the lawful heir, the fortunes of the portionless boy were solely dependent on the caprice of his wealthy kinsman, and she was consequently patient under his fractious tyranny. Her father's resentments were redoubled by the favour shown her at Stoke. Other members of the Cressingham family were yet more bitter and even scandalous in their interpretations. But she bore their animadversions without repining. The boy was so well, so happy, so beloved at Stoke, and so averse to seek for affection and kindness elsewhere, that it

scarcely needed an exercise of philosophy to enable her to submit unmurmuring to the injustice of the world.

At length, three years after her establishment in Buckinghamshire, Lord Ashleigh, as if roused to a new sense of her attractions on finding them appreciated elsewhere, renewed by letter his proposals of marriage. But they were declined without a moment's hesitation by Mrs Blair.—No need to address a word upon the subject to Sir Giles Cressingham. She wanted no advice—she wanted no encouragement; all it required was, to express in courteous terms her positive disinclination to become Countess of Ashleigh.

About a week after dispatching her letter, she began to notice that her cousin's daily visits were discontinued; and fearing that the old gentleman might be indisposed, she hastened to the Hall, which, except at the dinner-hour on Sundays, or by special invitation, she seldom entered. She soon found that he was not ill,—that he was only angry. On learning her renewed rejection of his friend the earl, her father had addressed a most indignant letter of remonstrance to the baronet;

and Sir Giles, who no longer threw into his rubbish drawer the letters bearing the Reading postmark, and was eager to vent upon some third person his rage at being reprimanded by Dick Cressingham, —now addressed a furious apostrophe to poor, patient Mrs Blair. He reproached her as bitterly for her ingratitude, in not having referred herself to his opinion in a crisis so nearly involving her welfare, as he could have done had she accepted the propositions of Lord Ashleigh, and quitted The Wilderness to become his wife. Nay, certain of his expressions were so humiliating, and so nearly approached a menace of dismissal from his favour, that Sophia, whose spirit was for the first time roused by his harshness, took the opportunity of their quarrel to announce a long-promised visit to a friend at East Bourne, and was off with Reginald on the following day for the coast.

Had this proceeding been a matter of policy instead of instinct, it could not have been more adroitly planned to bring the old gentleman to reason. After four-and-twenty hours' separation from the child and its mother, he began to discover how ill he could dispense with their presence. All the sunshine of his life was

lost! Again and again did he write to implore their return. He talked of illness—he became indisposed in right earnest; and threatened them with immediate dissolution unless the mother and son placed themselves instantly in the carriage which he dispatched once more to bring them home in ceremony to the hall.

The poor mother dared not persist in her refusal. She only stipulated that, since Reginald was to become a sort of state prisoner at Stoke Paddocks, proper care should be taken of his education; and as he was now more than seven years old, in addition to the pony and gun, a tutor and masters were provided for his use.

Rendered desperate by the impertinent suggestions of his cousin Richard, Sir Giles now spoke openly of the boy as his future heir. Though he never expressly announced it to Mrs Blair, it became known, through the indiscretion of his man of business, that a will in favour of young Reginald had been signed and sealed. Already, the servants treated him with the deference due to their future master; and already his relations spoke of him with the contempt due to their successful rival; and he was toadied by the dependents of the family,

and flattered by the country neighbours, as heir to one of the noblest estates in the county.

There was no need to toady, no need to flatter him. The boy's dispositions were as conciliating as his personal charms were remarkable. He was handsome enough for an heir apparent, even to a throne. His mother often grieved to note the false indulgence and pernicious adulation surrounding him; not only as fatal to the character of the future master of Stoke Paddocks, but because nothing could be more uncertain than his hold upon the affections of the capricious old man. A fit of peevishness or conscientiousness, to attacks of both which seizures old age is peculiarly liable, might at any moment determine him to fling his will into the fire, and allow the estates to devolve upon the heir at law. Reginald was still too young to be apprised of the nature of his position. All she could do in the way of palliative was to make him as good and reasonable as she could.

But the virtues and wisdom of eight years old, more especially when possessed of a gun, a pony, and a tutor required by his employer to teach the Latin grammar upon his knees, are not much to

be relied on. Reginald grew a little flighty, a little imperious. It was only towards his gentle yet often reproving mother, that he maintained the docility of his natural character. With the old baronet, above all, he became an absolute tyrant. Consciousness of power is a dangerous latitude for children and numskulls; and the boy of eight became a despot precisely on the same instigations as his cousin at eighty. He was perfectly aware that, if dismissed from the drawing-room in disgrace, Sir Giles could so little live without him, that, penitent or impenitent, he should be summoned back again, even sooner than he wished to come.

Mrs Blair, though by no means a woman of extended intelligence, became at length painfully alive to these perils and dangers; her perceptions being singularly quickened by the officious advice of Dr Chaffles, the Vicar of Stoke. Chaffles was a well-intentioned man, who, aware that his mission in this world was that of a counsellor, was as fond of interposing his wisdom in the temporal as the spiritual concerns of his parishioners. Without courage, however, to exercise his functions on the leader of his flock, to whom he manifested all the

blind devotion due to a patron saint, he consoled himself by besetting the fair lady of The Wilderness with assurances that her boy would be irretrievably spoiled by the weak indulgence of his patron, and her own reputation irrevocably injured by her equivocal position at The Wilderness.

For some time Mrs Blair replied to the latter insinuation with a smile;—the sullen decrepitude of Sir Giles vindicating his character as a seducer, as completely as her own depressed condition with respect to him, her own as a sultana. But by degrees the bitter drop insinuated day by day into her portion, acquired strength; and in the solitude of her isolated life, she assigned some importance to the insinuations of the vicar. She began to fancy herself slighted in the neighbourhood. She grew nervous whenever some accidental visit placed her in the presence of strangers. Dr Chaffles's object was attained. He had produced an impression, and a very disagreeable one it was!

The tactics of poor Mrs Blair, whose destiny it seemed to be ever the victim of persecution, were not of a very comprehensive nature. Again, as before, she betook herself to her friend at East Bourne; and again Sir Giles, on finding the

shutters of The Wilderness closed, and the nose of Reginald's pony thrust inquiringly over the gate of the meadow, as if wearying for the return of its young master, pronounced himself to be the worst used of mankind.

Just as the great despot of Versailles, on the retirement of Louise de la Vallière to the convent of Chaillot, dispatched a noble confidant with his equipages and sign-manual to bring her back to his arms, did the despot of Stoke now expedite old Matthews a second time to the Sussex coast. But the fair Sophia, like the lovely Louise, was inflexible. She had promised, she said, to spend a month with her friends, and afford Reginald the advantage of sea-bathing, and must adhere to her engagement.

On the return of his messenger and his family coach unsuccessful, the baronet became as furious as Roland the brave. He spent three sullen hours under his favourite beech tree—an alternative to which he had not been reduced since the tenancy of The Wilderness. An evil spirit had entered into him, as into Saul of yore, which there was no soothing harpist to dislodge. For several consecutive days, did he grumble and growl;—chiding the ser-

vants, cuffing his favourite dog, which, paralyzed like himself, was laid every day at the foot of his Bath chair to endure his caprices; and enacting the ejectment of tenants and the prosecution of trespassers and defaulters. Three disastrous law-suits, which afterwards tended to impoverish his successors, had their rise in the resolutions of those days of contrariety.

On the fourth, Dr Chaffles called in, *un*called for; and, almost for the first time, tendered advice to his patron nearly as uncalled for as his visit; assuring him, in the strictest confidence, that the feelings of Mrs Blair had long been severely hurt by the equivocal position of her son, and the slights produced towards her in society by her very questionable situation at The Wilderness.

Sir Giles stared with amazement; first, at the gratuitous loquacity of his vicar, who, saving in the pulpit, was scarcely held entitled to speak in his presence, unless when spoken to; and secondly, at a suggestion which his most discursive flights of fancy had never conjectured. *He* endanger a lady's reputation—*he?*—It was not till he had mused three hours more under the beech tree, that the astonished old gentleman had ex-

hausted the various gradations of surprise, horror, indignation, mirth, and satisfaction, arising from so preposterous a notion.

The *last* sentiment, as was not unusual with him, retained the ascendancy. The poor infirm octogenarian chuckled inwardly at the notion of being considered dangerous. Danger implied attraction. It was clear that many persons still supposed him capable of charming a lady's eye. In the midst of his yellow flannels, he drew up his crippled form with a smile of terrible exultation.

Recollecting that he had cut short the eloquence of Dr Chaffles, without giving time for the counsels which were to have followed his exposition, he sent a messenger to the vicarage, requesting the pleasure of his company, with a view to the termination of his gratuitous discourse. It occurred to him, and he was not mistaken, that the church would suggest reparation of his wrongs. It also presented itself to his mind, that Dr Chaffles would constitute a more dignified ambassador extraordinary than old Matthews, to bear to his cousin, Richard Cressingham's daughter, the extraordinary proposition, purporting to convert the widow into a wife, on the sole temptation of

becoming a widow again! even Sir Giles being perfectly aware that a jointure constituted the sole palliative to the innumerable disagreeables of the match.

No one who has not lived in a state of subjection to a person of bad temper and ignoble mind, can surmise the strength of aversion generated by such a position!—Mrs Blair disliked the tyrant of Stoke as much as she was capable of disliking any human being;—and the mere notion of his aspiring to fill the place of Reginald's father, converted her distaste into loathing.—Still, the interests of her son demanded that her negative should be phrased in measured terms. Sir Giles offered, in the event of receiving her hand, to make a formal adoption of her son, and confer on him, by act of parliament, his name and arms; while, on the other hand, though not absolutely expressed in his letter, it was pretty clear that her refusal would exile both child and mother from Stoke Paddocks for evermore. Dr Chaffles hinted as much while offering his strenuous advice that she should smile upon the suit of which he was the special pleader.

But there was a duty to be performed to the

dead as well as the living; and Mrs Blair would not hear of compromising a sentiment so sacred as that which bound her to the memory of her lamented husband. She refused;—gratefully,—respectfully,—but in words so decided as to leave to Sir Giles Cressingham not the slightest hope of her relenting in his favour.

"You will repent it, madam; you will repent it the longest day you have to live!" cried the vicar, on receiving her letter, and an intimation of its contents. "Sir Giles Cressingham, of Stoke Paddocks, forty-seven thousand a year, thirty of which within a ring fence,—is a man not to be trifled with! A wilful woman must have her way; but I beg leave confidentially to assure you that I would not be in your place, my dear madam, or in that of your son!"

If the truth must be told, the vicar did not at that moment consider his *own* particularly inviting. It was on *his* devoted head that the wrath of the baronet, on perusing the mortifying document, was likely to fall; and in spite of his cloth, he was almost as little able to evade the explosion of his patron's indignation, as the poor, paralytic Chloe, trembling at his feet!

But even Dr Chaffles, versed as he was in the intemperate egotism of the old man, had not prepared himself for the violent outburst of passion with which Mrs Blair's rejection was received. The vindictiveness of Shakspeare's Richard was not more ferocious. It was the first serious disappointment Sir Giles had received in the course of eighty years' experience! Happy, or rather unhappy man!—such an impunity tending chiefly to prove the narrowness of the sphere of his affections.

Furious at having been betrayed into a step productive of such deep humiliation; conscious that, but for the injudicious interference of his pastor, he should as soon have thought of applying to government for a mitre as to a pretty young woman of six-and-twenty for her hand; the old man indulged in such wild and wanton upbraidings as drove even the subservient Chaffles out of his house. The day was by no means a pleasant one for those who had no alternative but to remain under the same roof with the proudest of proud men, who found himself for the first time set at nought.

CHAPTER III.

"I will be sudden,
And she shall know Love, in extreme abused,
Knows no degree of hate!"

MASSINGER.

THE following day, Athanasius Docket, the man of business who had executed the former will of the baronet, was summoned anew to Stoke Paddocks. The instructions issued to him were secret and confidential as they were peremptory; and *this* time, he dared not open his lips to friend or foe touching the testamentary intentions of his patron.

On his departure, the mind of Sir Giles appeared considerably relieved. It was summer time. He caused himself to be rolled out once more upon the lawn; and was guilty even of a grim smile as he mused under the beech tree, satisfied that the work of vengeance was in progress! He indulged

in no further demonstrations of irritability. He attempted no overt tokens of displeasure against the lady of The Wilderness, but brooded over his malicious projects as silently as the assassin brews his cup of poisons; waiting in patience like the whirlwind of the poet,

> Which, hushed in grim repose, expects its evening prey.

Docket had assured him that a week would be requisite for the preparation of the deeds, and precisely to that stretch of time did he extend his provision of patience.

An old man tottering on the brink of the grave, yet concocting projects of earthly vengeance, is always a terrible spectacle; still more so when, like a rattlesnake coiled in the midst of some smiling and flowery Savannah, we find him surrounded by the most lavish gifts of nature,—the best blessings of Providence. There, under the spreading tree of his own fair lawn, sat the man who for eighty years had enjoyed a superabundance of the good things of this world,—its marrow and fatness,—its purple and fine linen;—for which he had never experienced one grateful emotion,—one thankful thought; for *he* believed

them to proceed less from the vouchsafing of Providence than from his own inherent right and title as representative of the Cressinghams of Stoke Paddocks.

And now, it was also as the representative of the Cressinghams of Stoke Paddocks that he was about to revenge himself upon one who had presumed to suppose that his feebleness of mind and body, his unsightly aspect, his wearisome companionship, were an inadequate exchange for the sacrifice of her youth and self-respect. The good gifts which had inspired him with no feelings of gratitude, conveyed at least facilities for working evil; and he was resolved that the contumacy of the fond mother should be punished with a refinement of malignity worthy the devising of a grand inquisitor.

He counted the days, he counted the hours. He dispatched messenger after messenger to Docket's office for re-assurances of his punctuality; and in the interim, consigned to that tomb of all the Cressinghams, the fatal drawer of the secrétaire, a letter bearing the East Bourne post-mark, and Dr Chaffles to Coventry. He waited. He took pleasure in waiting. Antici-

pation seemed to prolong the pleasures of vengeance.

At length the happy day approached; and had it been appointed for his bridal, he could not have hailed it with a warmer welcome. Already he had written to Mrs Blair,—written to her for the last time; not in a strain of upbraiding, but in friendly and complacent terms, as if acquiescing in the wisdom of her decision; begging that the past might be obliterated from her memory, and soliciting her return to The Wilderness on the 25th of June, about a week sooner than the time originally fixed:—arrangements nearly regarding the future welfare of her son, rendering it desirable that she should be present to witness the execution of some family papers.

Enchanted to find the old man thus benign and lenient, poor Sophia almost reproached herself for the dryness of the terms in which she had conveyed her rejection. She assured him of her ready compliance with his wish;—and on the evening of the 24th, drove into the gates of The Wilderness with exemplary punctuality. Dazzled by the variegated hues of its gay flower-beds, fragrant at that moment, with thousands of mid-

summer roses, she almost wondered how she had found courage to renounce the favoured spot so long, for the arid environs of the sea. At the door, she found a message from Sir Giles, pleading indisposition, and requesting her to defer her visit to the Hall till the morrow at one o'clock;—a delay affording no small relief to her terrors, which were powerfully excited by the prospect of their first meeting.

Next day she felt re-assured. She had rested after her journey. Her heart was cheered by the joyous prattle of the boy exulting in all the pleasures of home,—all the raptures of rejoining the pony and Dash, the keepers and old nurse Adams, after three weeks' separation; and taking him fondly by the hand, she proceeded on foot to the Hall.

A midsummer day in a fine old English park is a glorious thing. The deer taking refuge under the shade of its majestic avenues,—the song of birds bursting from the thickets,—the hum of insects vivifying the pastures enamelled by a thousand wild flowers—impart a tone of gladness and population even to its solitudes. Mrs Blair had never felt more alive to the beauties of

Stoke, than now when enhanced by the monotony of the South Downs;—just as the elegance of her cheerful home acquired a new charm in her eyes from the discomfort of the country parsonage in which she had been a guest. She felt doubly grateful to Sir Giles Cressingham that she had such a home to return to.

As they traversed a narrow path at the head of the lake, within a few hundred yards of the old mansion-house, a pair of swans, ancient sovereigns of the waters, sailed majestically toward them, descrying their benefactor Reginald, and hoping to be fed.

"Everything and everybody knows and loves me here, mother!"—cried the happy child. "Never let us leave Stoke again;—I have not a moment's pleasure when we are away from Stoke!"—

On entering the drawing-room, Mrs Blair was startled to perceive preparations for some extraordinary ceremonial. The gilded armchairs, covered with Gobelins tapestry, were moved from the wall to form a circle round a table; at the head of which was placed a reading-desk, and a salver containing a decanter of water and a single glass, evidently intended for the refreshment of the reader. But

before Mrs Blair had leisure to indulge in surmises, the turret clock struck the appointed hour; when the door of the drawing-room, leading from the suite of inner apartments, was thrown open, and in came a solemn procession, headed by old Matthews, preceding, in guise of chamberlain, the armchair of his august master, rolled by two footmen into the room.

Agitated by a thousand disagreeable anticipations, Mrs Blair hastened towards him; little suspecting that, great as was *her* emotion, the inward perturbation of the old man was a thousand times more overpowering. Every pulse in his attenuated frame was throbbing with rage and hatred, at sight of the only living being who had dared openly to avow that personal distaste which hundreds had found it difficult to suppress; and not the less painfully, because, in pursuance of his well-digested plans, he received her greeting with almost more than his accustomed courtesy of the old school. He even extended his hand to the boy, with the tender familiarity of a parent; till his generous forbearance brought tears into the eyes of Sophia.

Too deeply absorbed by the kindly demeanour

of her friend and benefactor to take heed of the train by which he was followed into the room, she continued to answer his inquiries concerning her visit and her journey; till, on turning from his chair, which was placed next to that appropriated to the reading-desk, she saw that every seat was occupied, save those intended for herself and her son.

Beside Sir Giles Cressingham, sat Docket, supported by his two clerks; all three being occupied by the arrangement of certain rolls of parchment, each of which consisted of a multiplicity of skins. The huge silver standish adorned in relief with the family arms, which stood at hand, seemed as judiciously matched in proportion with these weighty documents, as the tremendous sword of the Castle of Otranto, with its helmet of gigantic dimensions.

But on glancing beyond the chair placed at the right hand of Athanasius Docket, the cheeks of the gentle Sophia became suddenly crimsoned, to subside into deathly paleness; for, lo! for the first time for nine years past, she found herself in the presence of her father!—A momentary impulse urged her to rush forward and throw

herself into his arms. But the stern and formal salutation of Richard Cressingham seemed to mark the limits he chose to assign to their intercourse; and the next moment, Sophia congratulated herself that she had not given way to the instincts of filial tenderness, so long and so repeatedly outraged. The stony gaze with which her father fixed his eyes upon a grandchild whom he saw for the first time, recalled forcibly to her mind the contempt lavished by her family upon her ill-fated husband.

In the harsh countenance of Mr Cressingham, she now beheld only the persecutor of poor Blair. She even noticed that, although his head was now silvered and his face furrowed by the progress of years, its expression was more than ever obdurate and defying. She had not only lost a father in the stern and remorseless man before her, but had gained an enemy. Quailing under his chilling recognition, she felt persuaded that his presence in that room boded no good to her or hers.

Next to her father, came Doctor Chaffles, who was insinuating in whispers to Docket that his desk was placed in the worst possible position as regarded the light, and trying to persuade him to derange Sir Giles and the whole party for the

gratification of his officious zeal. Side by side with the Doctor sat his tender helpmate, Mrs Chaffles, who never entered the gates of the Hall save for an annual dinner of ceremony on the birthday of the proprietor; but who was especially invited on the present occasion by Sir Giles, his cruel cunning suggesting that the mortification of a woman is never so complete as when endured under the scrutiny of persons of her own sex.

Behind these conscript authorities were ranged a row of minor seats for the reception of the lower house, or steward's room; assembled as if for family prayers;—while, fidgetting between the two orders, stood a certain little man, arrayed, even at that early hour, in sticking-plaister shorts, black silk stockings, and silver shoe-buckles, who might have incurred suspicion as a dancing-master, but that he was only too well known to all present as the pet apothecary of the valetudinarian of Stoke Paddocks, the professional torturer of the establishment.

The circle consisted, in short, of pretty nearly the same individuals who would have been assembled in that very room to witness the nuptials projected by Sir Giles Cressingham with the

woman who sat there pale and trembling, foreseeing some impending anathema; and as the baronet gazed searchingly around him, to ascertain that every human being was present to whom he wished to exhibit her downfall, — triumph glared in his eyes, and flushed his withered cheeks with a hectic altogether unnatural. It was easy to perceive that the long stagnant current of his blood was strangely stimulated by the excitement of his unusual emotions. Before the sitting opened its proceedings, he even proposed, albeit unaccustomed to confront the contact of the external atmosphere even at midsummer, that one of the drawing-room windows should be opened for the refreshment of air; and great indeed was the relief of all present when a current of the warm, balmy breath of summer swept through the dreary saloon.

"I believe we are all ready, Mr Docket,—you may proceed to explain the business of the day," observed Sir Giles, in a voice less tremulous and more shrill than usual; whereupon the family solicitor, rising from his seat and ceremoniously taking off his spectacles, pompously announced to his auditors that they were assembled to become

witnesses of the execution of the *last* will of Sir Giles Cressingham then and there present;—that honourable gentleman having been apprized by certain of his nearest of kin that his infirmities and decrepitude were of a nature to prove that his days were drawing to a close.

As Docket gave utterance to this last insinuation, a malignant glance from the twinkling eyes of his patron towards poor Sophia, conveyed their exposition. But the taunt was unheeded by Mrs Blair. The fortunes of the noble boy who stood heedless by her side, were too deeply concerned in the passing scene, to admit of her referring one detail of its pomp and circumstance to herself. Had she been less absorbed, she must have noticed her father's air of exultation. It was clear that Richard Cressingham was fully aware of the nature of her offence towards the head of the family, as well as of the retribution by which it was about to be visited.

The smile of triumph had not subsided from his paternal face, when Docket, in a sonorous voice, began to recite the contents of one of the rolls of parchment; the preamble of which announced it to be "the last will and testament of Giles Marma-

duke Cressingham, Baronet, of Stoke Paddocks, in the county of Buckingham," and a vast number of other places in a number of other counties, "now residing in the above-named, his principal seat, and in a sound state of body and mind."

The mummy in the yellow flannels, whose mind was at that moment distracted by evil passions enough to have filled a whole penitentiary with delinquents, or a whole lunatic asylum with patients, bowed complacently on hearing the usual form, as if it conveyed a certificate of mental and bodily sanity, yet immediately proceeded to give proof to the contrary; for when Docket, about to enter into the WHEREAS department of the will, in which, in order to increase the amount of his own profits, he had introduced *verbatim* the title-deeds of certain estates, as well as several original grants and charters, judiciously suggested that it would suffice the purpose of the Baronet and the patience of the company to run over the few first words of every clause, Sir Giles insisted that every syllable should be inflicted upon himself and his friends.

The enumeration of his wealth and splendour purported to strike repentance into the soul of the graceless Sophia.

But the first blow conveyed in the words "hereby cancelling and annulling all former wills or codicils of wills," had sufficed to render her callous to all that was to follow.—She had sense enough to perceive that Sir Giles Cressingham would not cancel and annul the will made in favour of her boy, merely to indulge his lawyers with the profit of drawing up another of similar purport; — and feeling that all was lost for Reginald, cared as little to learn the amount of the baronet's enormous property, as the name of the devisee. She sat there as one stupified; her indisposition as clearly manifest as the innocence of Doctor Chaffles of all share in his patron's plan of vengeance; for, on seeing her turn so pale, the vicar officiously whispered her to change her seat for one nearer to the window, while the vicar's lady obligingly offered a bottle of salts; and both knew better than to have interfered in her behalf, had they been apprized of her approaching exile from the court of Stoke. Declining their interposition, however, the young widow seemed to derive some relief from motioning the boy, who was leaning against her, to a seat. It was too trying to look upon the handsome, animated

countenance of the injured Reginald at such a moment!

Doctor Chaffles nodded approvingly, conceiving the change to be suggested by the extreme heat of the room. The progress of the morning had brought the summer sun full upon the windows; yet such was the awe in which Sir Giles was held by his dependents, that till *he* was pleased to find the brightness oppressive, no one ventured to hint that the Venetian blinds had better be closed. Like the King of Spain, whom the etiquette of his court compelled to be stifled by a brasier, they bore without a murmur the increasing fervour of the atmosphere, aggravated by the presence of eight-and-twenty persons, rather than presume to feel differently from the Ali Pacha of the county of Bucks. Each whispered to his neighbour that there was thunder in the air,—that a heavy storm was approaching. Every face was flushed,—partly with the heat, partly with the excitement of the hour;—the lawyers from the ardour of their task,—Richard Cressingham with the earnestness of an heir presumptive,—the Chaffles's with the pride of having been invited to assist at a family solemnity at the Hall,—and all the domestics

with the idea that the ceremony of signing a will on the part of Sir Giles, must announce some sort of intention of betaking himself to a better or worse place than Stoke Paddocks. They seemed to anticipate that their own most welcome emancipation was approaching,—accompanied, of course, with decent mourning and annuities for life.

But the person most heated, both by inward and external excitement, was the pompous testator presiding over the assembly! The veins in his forehead were swollen,—his eyes bloodshot,—his lips compressed, as by the labouring of his lungs. Yet the glare of those bloodshot eyes increased in earnestness, and the scowl of that brow in triumphant malignity, at every fresh recital of the vastness of his earthly possessions, by way of taunt to the woman and child about to be driven forth from his Garden of Eden. It seemed as if, till that moment, even *he* had never been fully aware of his own consequence as lord of so many manors, and sultan of so many pachalics. He appeared to expand with the detail. His pride was growing too big for his body. His aristocratic blood was boiling too ardently in his enfeebled veins. Nearly three hours had been expended in

reading the magniloquent will, every moment of which served only to stimulate the morbid eagerness of the vindictive testator.

As yet, only the names of the trustees had been disclosed; no allusion had been made to that of the "sole heir and residuary legatee," for whose benefit that trust was created. But as Docket approached the two last skins of parchment which were to crown the work of vengeance, and point out the fortunate individual about to supersede young Reginald Blair as inheritor of one of the finest landed properties in the kingdom, a peculiar glance of intelligence was exchanged between one of the black-suited aid-de-camps of Mr Athanasius Docket and Richard Cressingham; after which, the latter assumed an air of listless unconcern, like a country actor exaggerating in his part the assumption of indifference.

Far greater exaggeration, however, was perceptible in the looks and gestures of one who was *no* actor in the business,—one whose emotions on the occasion were cruelly real. The wasted hands of Sir Giles Cressingham became involuntarily clenched as he listened;—and his eyes were fixed with the intensity of a beast of prey

upon those of Mrs Blair. His dress, usually motionless as the shroud enfolding the dead, seemed to heave and quicken with the agitation of his feelings. It was *his* turn to triumph. She was about to learn that *he* was omnipotent, and *she* an alien and a beggar.

Just as the fatal words were about to be pronounced by Docket, whose husky voice seemed to clear itself, and whose weary visage to brighten as he approached the climax of his work, a shriek burst from the lips of Mrs Blair, which suspended the decree.

Fascinated as by the glance of a rattlesnake, her eyes had been fixed on those of Sir Giles; and she was the only person present who discovered that they had become suddenly glassy,—that his face was livid,—his jaw fallen, — his whole form motionless.

Unable to move or speak, she pointed in silent agony to his chair. In a moment the parchments lay disregarded on the table. All present were crowding round THE CORPSE!—

CHAPTER IV.

"He dies and makes no sign!
Oh! God—forgive him!"

HENRY IV.

THAT was a solemn evening at The Wilderness. On re-entering her home, Mrs Blair could not but feel that an especial interposition of Providence had prevented her and her son from becoming shelterless. She regarded the events of the day, to others a source of horror and consternation, with sentiments of humble veneration, characteristic of her gentle nature.

A thunderbolt falling from heaven to smite to the dust some impious tyrant of old, could scarcely have exhibited a more fearful instance of Divine judgment than the fate of Sir Giles Cressingham,

howbeit arising purely from a combination of physical causes. The menials of the house decided, of course, that he died of a fit produced by the fear of death, at the moment of signing his will; the lawyers, of the perturbation consequent upon mental excitement; the vicar and vicaress, of the oppression of an overheated chamber; the apothecary (ashamed of not having interfered to demand freer ventilation), because the term of a long-exhausted constitution was arrived; Richard Cressingham, because the devil would have it; and Mrs Blair, because the hand of Providence had protected the fortunes of the widow and the orphan !—

Whatever the instrument by which the curse was signified, he was gone! The tyrant was stripped of his power, the miser of his gold, the angry man of his will to usurp the attributes of God. The right arm about to perpetuate an act of revenge, was already nerveless; the fevered frame moistened by the chilly damps of death; the scowling eye overfilmed: the despot shrivelled into a senseless lump of clay! His servants, who had waited upon his whims with submission in their voices, but hatred in their hearts, satisfied

by an ejaculation of the lawyers on the first verification of his decease, that the new will was inoperative, but that, the old one remaining uncancelled, their legacies were still valid, were at very little pains to disguise their indifference to the event. Within a few hours after the decease of Sir Giles Cressingham, voices were heard in cheerful colloquy under his roof, which had been wont to speak in peevish whispers; and there was laughter in the offices, and everywhere a sensation of relief. Reversing the usual order of things, the house of death proved anything but a house of mourning.

Although the blinds, so providentially neglected in the morning, were now carefully closed, the Hall itself had acquired an air of cheerfulness from the catastrophe. The double windows of the baronet's chamber, the very hinges of which had grown rusty from want of use, were thrown open. A greater stir than had prevailed at the Hall for years arose from the assembling of a jury, which the wantonness of the law chose to summon together to record the stereotyped verdict of "DIED BY THE VISITATION OF GOD;" just as they would have inflicted one of "FOUND

DROWNED," upon the body of some pauper thrust into a horsepond by her husband.

Could any doubt, meanwhile, have arisen in Richard Cressingham's mind as to his own position with regard to the property, it must have evaporated on noting the nature of Mr Athanasius Docket's address to Mrs Blair, the very moment Drench the apothecary pronounced that all was over; and the respectful bow which qualified his mode of seizing the hand of little Reginald. — His condolences on the death of their cousin were, in fact, eager congratulations upon their accession to a princely fortune. — Of both wills, the said Athanasius was appointed acting executor. No one, therefore, was more competent to judge their powers and intentions; and he made it as plain as if revealed by that first of truth-tellers, the *Gazette*, that the instrument which associated Mrs Sophia Blair, widow, with him in the executorship, was that which was to put money in his own purse as well as into that of her son.

At that moment, had Sophia been cognizant of anything that was passing around her, she would have hurried towards her father with overtures for

reconciliation; nay, in the agitation of her soul, would probably have flung herself into his arms or at his feet, and implored his blessing. But her feelings were paralyzed with horror. She saw nothing, — she understood nothing, — she even fancied that animation might yet be restored to the lifeless corpse,—repeated but infructuous attempts having been made by Drench to open the jugular vein.

It was not till many hours afterwards,—it was not till, tranquillized by the hush of evening in her own quiet home,—that the awe-struck woman became fully conscious of the great changes that had taken place, and in some degree aware of her position. But when she *then* despatched a messenger to the Hall with a letter to her father, it appeared that Mr Cressingham had already departed for his family seat; unwilling to remain at Stoke Paddocks, to exhibit the vexation and disappointment of his heart. The overtures of reconciliation, which would have come with so good a grace from the mother of the heir, consequently arrived too late.

It was perhaps the extravagant outburst of grief with which poor Sophia received back from the hands of Docket the missive thus fruitlessly for-

warded to the Hall, which revealed to the lawyer the amiable weakness of the character over which his position enabled him to assume an important influence. Conjoined with her in the execution of the will, as joint-guardians and trustees of the fortunate heir, it would be hard but a minority of ten years would enable the lawyer to lay aside all other professional cares, and enrol himself at some later period among the landed gentry of the county of Bucks.

Twenty years of continual intercourse with Sir Giles Cressingham, had not tended to the mollification of his heart or the strengthening of his principles; and Docket's first notion, on recovering from the stunning shock of finding the castle in the air he had been building up with pounce and parchment for Richard Cressingham vanish into the clouds, was to construct one for his own purpose, on earth, of more solid materials. The Stoke estates seemed to lie at his all but absolute disposal.

During the preparations for the funeral, nothing could exceed the consequentiality of the attorney in the assumption and manifestation of his new functions. The establishment at the Hall already

looked up to *him* rather than to the minor, as lord of the ascendant. *He* was to pay the bills, *he* was to discharge the legacies; for many years to come *he* was to be all in all at Stoke Paddocks.

Sophia, long debased by a life of dependence, and just then peculiarly enfeebled by the recent shock upon her spirits, unconsciously assisted to magnify the increasing prerogative of the executor; while Reginald, a shy, gentle boy, was only too ready to submit to the authority of one who seemed inclined to exercise it for the promotion of his pleasures.

It was amusing to see how instantaneously the dirty dog of Sir Giles Cressingham expanded into a man having authority;—issuing commands to menials, and inditing despatches, in the imperative mood, to bankers and stockbrokers. Not only did his manners attain a sort of instantaneous polish, but his mind appeared to have acquired preternatural consistency from the mere reaction of his unprecedented position. People might have inferred from his lofty bearing that it was he, Athanasius Docket, and not young Reginald, the kinsman of Sir Giles Cressingham, who was come into possession of seven-and-forty thousand a year.

A very short space was allowed for pomposity; the tenure of both being equally equivocal. Scarcely was Sir Giles laid in the grave, when bills were filed in Chancery, and processes served on the executors, and all sorts of grievances and aggravations attempted on the part, on one side, of Sir John Cressingham, as heir at law; and on the other, of Richard Cressingham, Esq., who contended for the execution of a nuncupative will in his favour.

Troublesome and expensive litigation, in short, constituted, as in many other cases, the first fruits of inheritance. Poor Mrs Blair, who had flattered herself, or rather who had been flattered by Docket, that the fortunes of her son were now secure, and who had already taken the preliminary steps for sending him to Eton with a private tutor and establishing herself at the Hall, was overwhelmed by a state of things almost more painful to bear than her original dependence. Familiar by hearsay, like all the rest of the world, with the uncertainties of the law and the ruinous delays of Chancery, to find *herself*, without money and without protection, suddenly launched upon this sea of troubles was a trial almost beyond her forti-

tude. Her sole consolation lay in a woman's unfailing and unavailing solace—tears; and instead of bestirring herself to seek advice, she wept over her own and Reginald's destinies, without forming a conjecture how they were to be amended. Like some victim of the days of fable, exposed to the jaws of a devouring monster, she beheld the fiery dragon Law advancing with extended jaws towards her, too much overwhelmed to hazard a single effort in her defence.

This was pretty nearly such a position of affairs as Docket had anticipated. When disappointed in his expectations of converting the Cressingham executorship into a quiet farm, to be enjoyed and managed at his own good liking, it afforded some comfort that costly proceedings would eventually secure to his hands, as attorney, the profits of which he was for the present defrauded as trustee. Though a receiver was appointed for the property, and though both the litigating parties had petitioned to have the Hall shut up and th expensive establishment reduced, till the hearing of the cause, Docket, as guardian of the minor and acting solicitor to the will, foresaw so vast an outlay in the way of pounce and parchment, as

insured a liberal inheritance, for the eventual apportionment of an incontestable will and testament of his own. Meanwhile, the depression of Mrs Blair placed *her*, and consequently the estate, almost at his disposal. It was through *him* she had to obtain the funds necessary for carrying on the suit:—it was from *him* she must seek the *counsels* indispensable for carrying on the suit:—his kindness and advice were to be all in all to the widow and orphan.

To a *poor* widow and *needy* orphan kindness and advice would, perhaps, have been cautiously administered by so shrewd a man. But "the mother of the heir of his patron Sir Giles was entitled to his utmost sympathy;" and nothing could be more diffusely pompous than his assurances to Sophia that she might rely upon him through all extremities. He advised, meanwhile, that Eton should be given up for the present; and affected to obtain the sanction of the Court of Chancery to her continued sojourn at The Wilderness, and retain, at his own risk, the attendance of the tutor originally procured for Reginald by his intervention with Sir Giles.

An absolute monarchy was consequently once

more established at The Wilderness. Fixing her devout faith upon the advice of one who, in the absence of natural protectors, was her only friend, —all she knew of the nature of her claims,—all she understood of her probabilities of success, were derived from this troubled and turbid source of information. Sophia was shy and timid. Most people admire shyness and timidity in women. Some go so far as to cultivate them, as virtues, in their wives and children; little reflecting how dangerously such qualities, however ornamental to the female character, conduce to place a woman at the mercy of designing persons, whether brilliant seducers or humdrum attorneys;—or how thoroughly they may invalidate the best qualities of the heart.

The daughter of Richard Cressingham had been brought up in mental subjection,—utterly ignorant of the value of money, or the realities of life; every one calling her that pretty, artless creature, Sophia Cressingham;—and the consequence was, an imprudent elopement.

Oppressed still more grievously by the patronage of the kinsman who affected to have stepped forward chivalrously in her behalf, she gradually

lost all energy of mind, all power of self-reliance; and at length, hunted by persecution, reviled by her father and family as an artful designer, and stigmatized by Chancery documents which, in her ignorance of business, she fancied as public as if recited at Charing cross, she was harassed by the dread of appearing over-solicitous for the things of this world, even in her interviews with her co-executor.

She dared not propose referring her case to higher councils. She was assured in so authoritative a tone by Docket her business was safe in his hands, that she resigned herself to stifle her anxieties during his absence; and when he came, to accept such information of the progress of her affairs as he chose to vouchsafe.

Poor Reginald, meanwhile, found little alteration in his position. He was not a whit more adored by his mother and nurse Adams, as the proprietor of the Hall, nor a whit less snubbed by his tutor. All accesses to The Wilderness were closed, saving those under the authority of the attorney; who was careful to circulate in the neighbourhood an opinion that the claims of the heir-at-law were

tenable, and the infirmity of mind of Sir Giles only too likely to be established.

In such uncertainties passed the first tedious winter succeeding the death of Sir Giles.

"I am sure I wonder what people meant by congratulating me after the poor old gentleman died," observed the boy, one day, to the good old nurse, the only person not to be debarred from treating him with the deference due to the head of the family. "The Hall is shut up. Half the keepers are sent away; and in their place, there is a set of surly, ill-conditioned fellows, who molest me by their interference every time I set foot in the park. I don't understand it all. If I am to be master at Stoke, it seems strange that I am so much less kindly used there, than while Sir Giles was alive! Nobody comes here now, but that tiresome creature, old Docket, whose visits always leave mamma in tears; and who makes her believe that I am better here, plodding on with Mr McAvoy, than at Eton,—but that I must not run about the village, or play with poor little Justina Chaffles, as I used to do. I don't want to be a rich man. I don't care to be master at the Hall.

But I *do* wish we had a nice, comfortable cottage of our own,—with cheerful, pleasant people to talk to; and that I might never hear the name of a lawyer, or see the sour face of old Docket again."

It was not often that the boy was allowed leisure for such colloquies as these. Docket had succeeded in persuading the anxious mother that a boy with such wonderful prospects ought to be wonderfully learned; and that twice as much Latin and Greek would be required of him as of other young men. Study, therefore—laborious study—was the order of the day; and even when Reginald was released, in the evening, from the documentations of his pedagogue, it was only to find his mother, harassed and careworn, musing beside her solitary hearth, and unapt for conversation.

Her solitary meditations, on the other hand, became daily more perplexing, as her situation grew more and more complicated. Scarcely a cheering ray was allowed by Docket to reach the heart upon which he had fastened his bat-like clutch. Invariably, his first movement on entering the drawing-room at The Wilderness was to shake

his head. His first communication was sure to be the recital of some fresh proceeding on the part of Sir John Cressingham, or some new and cruel misrepresentation on the part of her father; till poor Sophia actually trembled to confront the eye of a stranger, so persuaded was she that the imputed turpitude of her conduct had steeled all hearts against her and her son.

Mistrust and anxiety, by increasing her natural shyness, at length produced the evil of which she stood in dread. Her reserve began to pass for pride with the vicar's lady and the few other country neighbours who found it worth while to frequent a house in which sounds of feasting and rejoicing were unknown. Some went so far as to decide that Mrs Blair, under the influence of her prodigious expectations, was growing thoroughly disagreeable; and amid the mutual dissatisfactions thus engendered, the poor aggrieved woman found relief in closing her doors altogether, save against the visitations of her faithful Amadis, Athanasius Docket. The attorney, as he anticipated, had it completely his own way.

Meanwhile the Chancery suit went on, Chancery-wise. Though, whenever he saw her sinking

into positive despondency, the attorney renewed his attestations that the cause was safe;—that the proceedings were inevitably slow, but that the opinion of the profession was in her favour, the mole-like working of her adversaries was continually throwing up fresh obstacles under her feet; and so vehement and so active became the rival claimants of the Cressingham estates, that, as far as regarded the public mind, the rights of her son appeared to have lost their tenability.

Under such circumstances, her pecuniary difficulties increased daily. A distringas had been placed upon the property. Every arrangement for an allowance to the minor was negatived or traversed; and poor Reginald was perpetually saddened by the sight of his mother's despondency, and the discussion of necessities and expedients such as ought never to have come to the knowledge of his young mind. Money was the constant theme of Sophia's conversation. She fancied the shy, gentle boy heedless of what was passing. But, in the rare intervals of his studies, his ears were drinking in terrible lessons of the omnipotence of riches as an instrument of human happi-

ness, and as connected with domestic sorrows peculiarly his own.

Darker still, however, were fated to be the prospects of the widow. At the close of two years and a half, Docket himself, whose misgivings on the subject of the great cause of Cressingham *versus* Cressingham had hitherto been affected, grew *really* anxious on the subject. Things were taking an unfavourable turn. A change of ministry had produced a change in the legislative wisdom of the land; and rumours were afloat that a new light was likely to operate a decision fatal to the minor.

Trembling for the advances he had made, and foreseeing a barbarous taxation of his professional demands, Docket vented his disappointment upon his unhappy client; setting before her, in the darkest colours, the extremities to which she would be reduced should the general opinion prove correct; till Sophia began to look back to her gloomy lodging at Reading, and her heavy maternal labours, as a blessed and peaceful existence compared with the load of debt and shame under which she must labour when ignominiously ejected from The Wilderness by Sir John Cressingham.

"We have not one friend on earth to afford us shelter or succour!" was her exclamation to nurse Adams, when the attorney took his departure after these pleasing announcements; and all that Reginald could do, in token of sympathy, was to creep silently to his mother's side and moisten her hand with his tears.

CHAPTER V.

Full little does thou know who hast not tried
What Hell it is in suing, long to hide,
To speed to day,—to be put back to-morrow,—
To feed on hope,—to pine with care and sorrow.

SPENSER.

HAD such a measure as compromise been possible between the minor and the heir-at-law, Docket would not, at that moment, have hesitated to recommend it, or Mrs Blair to give it her sanction. But luckily, the improvidence of timid natures was frustrated by the peculiar bearings of the case. All that remained for Sophia was to endure with patience the fluctuations of the attorney's expectations and temper. She was not aware of those of her own; she did not know how often poor Reginald had to suffer

from the total absence of method and system in a house supported by expedients, having no plans for the future, and very little enjoyment of the passing day. He found no sympathy. His impulses of youthful joy were checked by the sadness of those by whom he was surrounded. The progress of his mind was unheeded; the bent of his nature unexamined; he was an object of almost painful solicitude to his mother, whether as the heir to fifty thousand a year, or as a beggar. She felt that she was either doing too much or too little for him; and above all, she had not a single easy, unoccupied hour in which to clasp him to her bosom, and glory in him as her child. Nothing was done to cheer him—nothing to cultivate his affections.

"I'm sure it's a melancholy sight to meet the poor lad moping about from hill to dale with that priggish-looking tutor of his," was Mrs Chaffle's confidential lamentation to her husband. "Cressingham, or Blair, or whatever he is to be called, it would have been a blessed thing for him had the old gentleman left him, instead of a *visionary* fortune, two or three comfortable hundreds a year, and to know where to look

about him for it. Mrs Blair's bill at Milham's is running up to more than I choose to say; and as to the lad, he hasn't a comfort or a playfellow in the world! It would make your heart ache to see how he colours up, and how the tears come into his eyes whenever Tina runs up to kiss him, as she is sure to do when we meet him parading over the meadows with his tutor, as prim as if they were following a funeral."

"I fancy his prospects are not likely to brighten," observed the vicar cheerily, in reply; "that poor woman would never take my advice! I could have put her in the way of managing Sir Giles so as to secure the boy's succession. And now, could put her in the way of settling her Chancery affairs without further litigation,—which will not leave the estate a leg to stand upon. Even as it is, why can't she give the poor boy a plain, manly, sensible education?—But that, you see, is her pride, poor woman! She was going to send him to Eton, when she found out that the will was as good as null and void; and now she can't afford that, forsooth, nothing less will content her!—There's Randsley Grammar School. A youth may get

his learning quite as well, and his morals better, at Randsley Grammar School than at Eton."

"I must say, it's a great misfortune to the neighbourhood to have the business dragging on in the way it does, the estate going to rack, and the house shut up as it is," murmured Mrs Chaffles.—"It will be the ruin, too, of poor Mr Docket, who will never be able to remain here after all the provocations that have been going on, when once Sir John has taken possession of the property, as is most likely, and most to be desired; for he has sacrificed all his other business, and been maintaining this foolish woman and her son, and will only lose his money at last, and be laughed at for his pains. Why couldn't he manage like *us?* *We* have taken part with no party. Let the cause be decided as it may, the Hall must always remain open to us."

The opinions thus freely canvassed between the vicar and his wife, were tolerably general in the parish. The Wilderness was in complete disfavour. People nodded their heads contemptuously, in alluding to Mrs Blair; and had scarcely the civility to touch their hats to the shy

boy, when they met him musing in the green lanes or fishing in the solitary stream. They wished him well out of his law proceedings,—and they wished him further. It was all the fault of the Blairs that the circulation of ten thousand a-year was lost to the neighbourhood;—and the Stokeites spoke of the Chancery suit as if it were simply an injury done to them by poor Sophia.

Such was the melancholy state of affairs when, just at the close of term, about four years after the sudden death of Sir Giles, and the commencement of these harassing litigations, Athanasius Docket, Esq., found himself suddenly summoned to town by the London solicitors in his employ. Apprehending further demands for retaining fees or advances, or he knew not what, Athanasius took care to call at The Wilderness previous to his departure, to express, for the thousandth time, his bitter regret at having ever been involved in affairs so onerous and unsatisfactory; winding up with the usual clause of "not that I mean to blame *you*, my dear Madam, or my young friend; only I *must* say it is rather hard that the whole weight and responsibility of a suit in which I am no wise concerned, should fall upon myself.—I

am off to London again!—another useless and expensive journey! However, we must carry it through—we have no choice—we must carry it through. To-morrow, Madam, I hope to be able to report progress."

On the morrow, however, as far as the post was concerned, no progress was reported. In reply to Mrs Blair's inquiries at Docket's office, it appeared that no news had arrived from him: and all she had to do was to submit to another day of suspense, galled by pressing applications for money, and deriving new terrors from a recommendation she had just received from her medical attendant to remove her son from The Wilderness for change of air,—the evident depression of his spirits probably proceeding from incipient indisposition.

"Ill—seriously ill—the air of this place disagreeing with him—yet unable to stir!—My poor, poor boy!—I am sick at heart,—sick of my very life,"—mused the afflicted mother, as she sauntered that evening along the now weedy walks of her garden. "And all this heartburning,—all this mortification—all this alarm—to proceed from that which I once so little estimated, the influence of money!—I cannot enjoy the company of that

darling fellow,—I cannot look his tutor or Mr Docket in the face,—I dare not walk through the village, or accost my humble neighbours—for want of the means of doing justice to them and myself. The poor come here to be relieved, and I am forced to deny them. My tradesmen come here to be paid, and I am obliged to meet them with excuses. My neighbours shun me—my family despise me. I have not one happy hour—one easy moment!—And yet I have done no wrong!—I am all I was when the world regarded me so kindly. Why—why—was I never made to estimate, in my youth, the omnipotence of mammon in this cold-blooded world?"—

Tears flowed from her eyes as she reflected upon Reginald and his precarious prospects.

It was a clear spring evening; one of those cheerless evenings in April, when a chilly twilight makes one apprehend that the spring flowers and early leaves will be blighted if left out for the night. Everything was dispiriting. The birds seemed to want shelter,—all nature to want geniality. It was too early to return to the house,—too late to remain in the air. Mrs Blair inquired anxiously for Reginald. He was out

with his tutor. He was probably in the park. She accordingly opened the gate of communication leading into it from The Wilderness (the source in Sir Giles's time of so much evil interpretation), in order to go in search of him and persuade him to come into the house. When lo! ere she had proceeded many paces, she descried a postchaise and four, galloping furiously along the grand avenue, which, as it drew nearer, appeared to be covered with laurels, while the postboys had ribbons streaming from their hats.

"Can there be an election going on?"—was Sophia's first ejaculation—"I have not *heard* of one—But no one is at the trouble of bringing us news of the county *now*."

At that moment, an idea glanced into her mind which caused every drop of blood in her veins to stagnate! If the cause should be decided! If this should be Sir John Cressingham coming to take possession,—coming to drive Reginald from his home!—Unable to support herself, she tottered back to the gate, and stood leaning there with her eyes fixed haggardly upon the chaise. But it had now passed the turn leading to the Hall; and came dashing up towards The Wilder-

ness. The wheels struck fire from the flinty road. The boys huzzaed; and as they drew nearer, an arm waving a white handkerchief was seen protruding from the open window.

Mrs Blair had lost all self-possession or power of speech when at length the carriage stopped at her door, and Docket leapt out. His eager congratulations, his noisy demonstrations of triumph, however, scarcely arrested her attention. Reginald, whom he had met at the entrance of the park and forced into the chaise, was now in his mother's arms; and in spite of the attorney's outcries of joy, a still small whisper reached her amid all her convulsive sobs, of—"Thank God, dearest mother, your troubles are over!—Nothing but peace and comfort for the remainder of your days!"

All was safe! A decree of the Lords had decided irrevocably in favour of young Cressingham; and though Docket loudly protested he had never a moment doubted that such would be the result, it was clear from his obstreperous joy, which defied for a time the control of even *his* cautious discretion, that he was quite as much taken by surprise as either of his clients.

After the first necessary explanation, Sophia longed eagerly for his departure. She wanted to be alone with her son. She wanted to fall on his neck and weep. For some time past, she had almost dreaded to be alone with him. He had been a source of as much pain as pleasure to her. She had learned to tremble for him; to fear that he might come to pain—to humiliation! *And now!* Yes!—she yearned to be alone with him,—to fold him in her arms—to own how deeply she had suffered now that her sufferings were over,—and to whisper to *him* as he had whispered to her, "Rejoice greatly — henceforward all around us is to be comfort and peace!"

Poor Sophia! The influence of mammon had done its work even upon *her*. Her very heart expanded in the artificial sunshine produced by a shower of gold. The improvident girl who had fled from her prosperous home to become the drudge of a penniless soldier, had learned to bow the knee to the molten calf among the servile multitudes of mankind.

Within an hour, the gardens of The Wilderness were crowded with the whole population of the village of Stoke! On the following day the

house itself would scarcely contain the obliging neighbours who hastened, with singular alacrity, to offer their congratulations to the happy family. Everybody shook hands with everybody. Everybody smiled in the face of everybody; everybody seemed eager to admit that this accession of fortune, on the part of mother and son, was all that had been wanting to complete the happiness of everybody. The Reginald Blair they had found it so easy to overlook, was become gigantic as Reginald Cressingham. Reginald Blair had been voted dull and moping,—Reginald Cressingham was shy and interesting, They had been angry with Sophia for not sending Reginald Blair to a grammar school; while, as to Reginald Cressingham, they could scarcely bear to have him torn away from them, even to go to Eton!

The atmosphere of The Wilderness, so long stagnant with solitude, or disturbed only by murmurs of discontent, was now astir with cheerful voices and sounds of exultation. The musicians of Stoke came carolling to the gates, with their serpent and bassoon. The ringers nearly brought down the belfry of the old church, with their bob majors. The old Hall was thrown open at the

suggestion of Docket, and the people drank the health of the Heir of Stoke Paddocks in hogsheads of his own ale; and condescended to demonstrate their joy by roasting and devouring the sheep and oxen of his flocks and herds. It was impossible to be too much rejoiced at his triumph over his enemies!—

The boy, meanwhile, was more embarrassed than gratified by this prodigious accession of popularity. A week before, the little merry girl at the vicarage was the only living being, save his mother and nurse Adams, who troubled her head concerning him; and though, at little more than thirteen, his philosophy, or his curiosity, did not extend so far as to inquire circumstantially into the motives of their sudden enthusiasm, there was nothing in it to excite his own.

For the immediate result of this brilliant transformation of his destinies was to sink him into a school-boy! His mother was relieved from a thousand evils. His mother was released from the moral nightmare called debt; and the still bitterer visitation of dependence upon the will and pleasure of Athanasius; for though seven years of minority were still to elapse, she was too

equally associated with him in the guardianship, to admit of his harassing her by further contrarieties.

But the heir had no such consciousness of release. All *he* had to do was to take his departure for the "antique towers," in company with the pedagogue who had so belaboured him with learning at home; and the shy boy, who, so long as the consummation seemed impossible, desired nothing so earnestly as the companionship of Eton, traditionally dear to him as the place where his father had received his education, became appalled beyond measure now that he found himself on the eve of encountering the quizzing and hoaxing of a public school.

When, after an affectionate parting from his mother, he bade adieu for the first and last time to The Wilderness, Reginald would willingly have given half the rent-roll of his estate, for the privilege of remaining planted among the oaks of Stoke Paddocks, safe from the bantering and examination of this wicked world, and able to saunter away the fine weather in the woods, and the rainy days with a book in his hand, or in a game of play with Justina.

CHAPTER VI.

" Thus all-accomplished, ere he yet begin
To show the peeping down upon his chin."

COWPER.

IT was a great trial to Sophia to part from her darling son. Even she, disinterested as is the natural tenderness of a mother, found herself setting a higher value upon Reginald now that he was become of such immense importance to other people; and nothing but her recollection of her husband's prejudices in favour of Eton, and the incessant harangues of Athanasius Docket (who found the leisure of his ward hang heavy on his own hands) concerning the necessity of a public education to the career of an English gentleman, would

have determined her to part from the idol of her affections. — What would become of her apart from Reginald? — No sooner, however, was he gone, than she found her time fully disposed of. Engagements poured in upon her; the newspapers, which took such fond delight in recording every particular respecting the interesting youth, in whose favour was decided the great cause of Cressingham *versus* Cressingham had reminded of her existence hundreds of friends of her youth, to whom she had become as one dead; and thousands of Blairs and Cressinghams, who beset her with letters from almost every county in Great Britain.

Between the arrangements of her pecuniary affairs and a sort of tacit reconciliation with the neighbourhood, which no longer thought her sulky or voted her proud, she had not leisure to regret the company of her son more than twenty times a day.

All her care was to effect the restoration of Stoke Paddocks to its pristine state.—She had set her heart upon seeing the Hall restored to the same dignified condition as when it had

first produced so strong an impression upon her imagination; and while thus occupied in the reorganization of house and household, it was easy for Docket to become once more lord of the ascendant in more important instances. The despotism of former days was all but renewed. Long debarred from the free use of her faculties, Mrs Blair had almost forgotten how to use them. She was thankful to Docket for the assiduous zeal that spared so much trouble to her indolence; for under his active auspices all the disarray of an estate, racked and tortured by a Chancery suit as by the possession of a devil, was disappearing, and order and magnificence resuming possession of the throne.

"At present, dear Reginald is indifferent to such matters," was Sophia's secret reflection, as the Christmas holidays approached. "Simple in his tastes as he is reserved in his manners, he has not an ambition beyond the chimney corner of The Wilderness! At nearly fourteen, he is still a child. It is not his fault, however, poor fellow, that the retirement in which he was brought up should have confirmed the reserve of

his sensitive nature! How overjoyed will he be to find himself in his own quiet home again! —What a relief the seclusion of this place! I only trust our good friend, Mr Docket, will not come and wear down his spirits by reference to business, as he does mine; or exercise too much authority over his pursuits. Reginald's timid nature would give way under the interference to which I have learned to submit."

Never had she taken such delight in the renovated beauty of The Wilderness, as now that she was on the point of welcoming home her child. His unsophisticated tastes were likely to pass unheeded a thousand details of luxury and comfort; but even the careless and almost slovenly boy would be pleased to find the gardens restored to all their primitive pride;—the new winter shrubbery of evergreens and well-rolled walks exhibiting all the care of a skilful gardener. His own favourite garden alone had been scrupulously left untouched, that he might enjoy, as in former times, the pleasure of operating his own improvements. Beside it, however, a little hovel had been erected, to contain the new tools and

horticultural implements prepared for him by the forethought of his mother, against the return of Spring.

It was after surveying these preparations, and visiting his own old room, newly and commodiously furnished, that Sophia hurried down, about the hour appointed for Reginald's arrival. For one so sensitively shy, it would be a trial to meet even herself and Adams, after four months' separation: and when the carriage stopped, she was already on the door-steps, prepared to welcome the little fellow, now almost a stranger at The Wilderness.

Mrs Blair was scarcely less struck on beholding Sir Giles lifeless in his arm-chair, than at the first aspect of her son!—Young Cressingham advanced to do the honours to her with the ease of a fine gentleman. He had left her an awkward boy,—he was come back a miniature man. There were tears in his eyes, indeed, more manifestly than became his manly dignity, when pressed to the heart of his mother, and earnestly saluted by the old nurse. But he quickly recovered himself,—took his place authoritatively on the hearth-rug,—informed her that, unwilling to trouble her with

the company of Mr McAvoy, he had despatched his tutor, at once, to spend the vacation in the North,—and inquired after Docket much in the same patronizing tone he asked after the house-dog.

Sophia no longer wondered that, for the last two months, he should have become remiss in his correspondence. She felt that she should scarcely have understood him, had he written in the style he was talking. While gazing with pride upon his growth and personal improvement, she could enter into the share of a fashionable London tailor in his transformation. But who had effected the marvellous revolution in mind and morals? *Who* had given breadth of spirit, as well as breadth of shoulders? Who had inspired self-reliance? Who had fortified the unstrung nerves? Who had converted poor Blair's timid orphan into the spirited heir of the house of Cressingham? Was it *still* the power of Mammon? Was it in *this* instance the worship of the multitudes bowed down in breathless adoration around the golden calf?

She did not so much as venture to advert to the hovel and garden-tools, or the new pony-chair,

in which she had intended to solicit his aid as charioteer.—Already he was giving hints about battues, and talking of a tandem !—

It was almost a comfort to her when, after applying a series of saucy epithets to his guardian and inquiring after the various families of the neighbourhood in terms far from complimentary, —after talking of hunters and greyhounds, neat turn-outs, and clever hacks—he condescended to allude to Justina and the old pony !—He asked after them, however, rather in the tone of a patron than a friend.

"I suppose, mother, you don't see much of that horrible old Chaffles woman?" said he; "but my little pet, — how is she? — I was very near bringing her a macaw, which I saw in Windsor as we drove through! Justina had always such a passion for birds. I suppose we need not trouble ourselves with the old bores at the Vicarage. But surely Tina might be brought to see me?"

Mrs Blair resolved to defer to some moment less interesting than the first evening of their meeting, her entreaties that he would render to the Vicarage the respect due to the Vicarage; and soon forgot her vexation in delight at his

affectionate inquiries after the pony and one or two of his old pensioners in the village.

Eton, however, soon burst forth again!

"I have promised Morton and Holmeswell to give them a week's shooting at Stoke during the holidays," said he; "I suppose you can manage to put them up for me?"

"And who are Morton and Holmeswell?" inquired his mother, in some surprise.

"Don't you know Morton and Holmeswell? I thought every one knew Morton and Holmeswell. Morton is the best dressed fellow at Eton; and Holmeswell one of the finest riders in England,—both capital fellows. We dined together at the Christopher the night before I came off. Capital fun, I assure you. Holmeswell was regularly floored!"

The consternation of Mrs Blair knew no bounds. Even *her* serenity was beginning to be disturbed on finding strangers, even though schoolboys, invited to her house without consulting her inclinations on the subject. But maternal partiality prevailed; and she soon began to make allowances for the young dandy, by assuring herself that he was merely showing off for the

astonishment of an over-fond mother. The morrow would restore him to reason. The morrow would bring Docket in all his glory of guardianship. A few words from Docket would place everything straight. The grave authority under which she lay crushed would probably work miracles equal to those of Eton.

The morrow *did* bring Docket—and the morrow witnessed the working of more miracles;—but not of the nature anticipated by Mrs Blair. Unwilling to witness the humiliation of Reginald on receiving a reprimand, she had judged it better to leave him *tête-à-tête* with the executor, and discreetly left the room.

In about half an hour, she returned; expecting to find the man of the law, as usual, laying down the law, and looking as hard as a bronze statue. She even trembled to look at Reginald, lest the blush of ingenuous shame, produced by merited reproof, should burn too brightly on his cheek.

No need of alarm!—The blushing cheek was that of Docket. The subdued demeanour was that of Docket. It was Reginald who had been laying down the law, and who looked as lofty as the statue. Reginald had been quizzing his guar-

dian unmercifully on the cut of his coat; and, instead of resenting his impertinence, the attorney was all obsequiousness — all courtiership;—quite ready to varnish the boots of his ward, whenever occasion needed.

"I have been talking to Mr Docket, mother," said he, too politic to drop the Mr with *him* as with others, lest it should encourage so vulgar a man to take liberties, "I have been talking to Mr Docket about the shooting, and he promises me excellent sport for Morton and Holmeswell. But we have been agreeing that it will be as well for them to stay at the Hall."

"By no means, my dear boy!" said Mrs Blair, fearing that her surprise of the preceding evening might have been unkindly interpreted. "I assure you they will be no inconvenience to me here. There is Mrs McAvoy's room; and I can easily put up a bed in the blue dressing room."

"Yes, certainly, but I am afraid that sort of thing would scarcely do. You see, Morton is accustomed to—a—a—and Holmeswell is deuced particular. By the way, it will be quite impossible, mother, for you to remain here long; this house is so detestably inconvenient. Mr Docket

agrees with me, that you ought to remove next summer to the Hall, with a suitable establishment. We must petition Chancery for an additional allowance on pretence of keeping up the place. I shall then be fourteen, and shall have some voice in the business. In the mean time, Mr Docket will be delighted to favour our wishes. It is settled, therefore, that while Holmeswell and Morton are here, we take up our abode *pro. tem.* at the Hall. I should not like them to find my mother lost in the pokiness of this citizen's villa!"

The heart of Mrs Blair swelled within her. She longed to give him a lesson. She longed to recall to his mind his boyish delight, when the needy widow and child were first transferred to that happy retreat! But she forbore—forbearance had long been habitual to her gentle nature. Besides, she had promised herself never to estrange the confidence of that only son by severity. Her selfishness, under the form of maternal affection, had not courage to do him justice. She saw, too, that she should find no support in her co-trustee. When she raised a few objections to the new plan, Docket laughed away her scruples,—the first time the priggish attorney had ever seen fit to laugh at

a scruple !—and assured her that Reginald's views and habits differed in nothing from those of other young men of his age and degree. He even expressed himself pleased that "the shy boy should at once have associated himself with companions so desirable, as Viscount Holmeswell, only son of the Earl of Maunderwell; and Sir Henry Morton, who, on attaining his majority, would come into a very pretty property in Leicestershire."

Between the authority of Docket and the assumptions of Reginald, Sophia found that her influence would be speedily superseded; and in the indolence of a crushed spirit, gave up the field without fighting a blow. She had soon occasion to improve her acquaintance with "a neat turn out" and "clever hacks;" for Docket was careful to provide, against the arrival of the threatened guests, precisely such accommodation as was voted necessary by his Etonized ward. A small suite of rooms was fitted up at the Hall, and a couple of grooms, with several horses, suddenly made their appearance in the stables; Mrs Blair being forced to subscribe to Docket's opinion that, since Reginald already exhibited the tastes of a man of pleasure, it would be safer for them to

make his home so pleasant to him, as to leave him no pretext for seeking such indulgences elsewhere. To appease the alarms of the mother, he even undertook to preside at the Hall, during the visit of the young Etonians, upon condition that she agreed to her son's proposition, and installed herself permanently at the Hall, in the course of the ensuing summer.

It is a startling trial to a parent to find the child — the weakling—over whom he has been wont to exercise tender protection, suddenly shoot up into independence. Sophia found that, according to the system of the present day, she had lessons to receive from her son. She, a woman, knew nothing of the world, as now constituted; he, a boy, was comparatively better instructed. Certain it was that he was more versed in the usages of the day, than the amiable recluse of The Wilderness. The accession of fortune which seemed to have increased her diffidence by augmenting her responsibility, had inspired *him* with courage and purpose.

But had it not given too much courage for his strength—too much purpose for his discretion? Was it not the result of the stimulus of flattery?

Had not the boy Crœsus been surrounded with parasites? Did not his advancement, in short, resemble the precocious growth of a plant, overforced by artificial heat? Sophia was too fond of him—too proud of him—to exercise much judgment on the case. Whether as a shy boy or a microcosmic man, the only son was still the object of her adoration.

There was but one person who exercised sounder discretion. Justina, who, though advanced to the dignity of white frocks, retained at eight years old all the fearless *naïveté* of infancy, openly scouted the pretensions of the fine gentleman of Stoke Paddocks.

"You told me Reginald was coming home," cried she to Mrs Blair, seizing her by the hand as they met one day at the church door of Stoke, "and I was so glad!—I did love *him* so dearly! But I don't care a bit for Mr Cressingham. He came one day to see grandpapa, and talked about nothing but hunting and shooting. He took no notice of *me*. But 'tis no great matter; for he is not near such a nice little boy as he used to be!"

Poor Tina, however, was the only person within

twenty miles round, of the same opinion. The neighbourhood had been so long accustomed to regard Stoke Paddocks as a Paradise Lost, that the promise afforded by the gay young heir of the house of Cressingham, was hailed with delight. The world pronounced that law and equity had, for once, united wisely in favour of the handsome junior, instead of the decrepit Sir John, or his surly brother.

All looked forward to brighter days at the Hall. The sportsman foresaw battues, — the young ladies, balls. Mr Cressingham was making an admirable beginning. Young as he was, lords and baronets already congregated around him. Though hampered by a vulgar attorney and quizzical mother, the boy had evidently the instincts of a gentleman, and Eton was doing its best towards their development. At fifteen, he might almost have stood for the county.

Athanasius Docket, meanwhile, though scarcely less surprised in the first instance than Mrs Blair, had sufficient ductility of mind to bow without hesitation to the force of circumstances. As promptly as when, at his patron Sir Giles's commands, he perused the instrument transferring the

inheritance of Stoke from Reginald to his grandfather, did he now determine to win by subservience where he had intended to sway by authority. Perceiving that, in his ward, he had a very different disposition to cope with from the anxious, timid Sophia, his own interests might still be served by the propensities of the young *roué*. If he proceeded as he begun, there was every probability that, before the attainment of his majority, the amount of its savings would be forestalled; and that, instead of increasing the rent-roll of the estate by new purchases, it would be diminished by the prodigality of a spendthrift. Should this prove true, it became the duty of a guardian to modify the injury, by keeping him out of the hands of the Jews by private accommodation. Were young Cressingham to die a minor, his property would fall to his mother, from whom the attorney knew that he had nothing to fear in the way of scrutiny. The far-sighted attorney accordingly permitted himself to become the *âme damnée* of one whom he was resolved to render an *âme damnée* of his own. On casting up account with the future, he found that his best mode of insuring a balance in his favour, was

by installing himself the Mephistopheles of the young Faustus. If Satan can quote scripture for his purpose, a clever attorney is equally capable of "taking all shapes and bearing many names;"—of preaching, whenever to "do the decent" is the order of the day, and practising, in very antithetical style, wherever it be safe to let the cloven foot peep out, undisguised by a gouty shoe.

He accordingly instituted himself perpetual president of the orgies of the Hall, till Sir Henry Morton assured Reginald that, if old Docket were not quite such a curse of a quiz, he would be a capital good fellow; while Holmeswell was never weary of assuring his friend Cressingham, that he had got a "trump of a guardian." He wished he could give him as an example to his own father; swearing that he "would not only exchange the Earl against him, but throw something into the bargain."

With these views in perspective, it was not surprising that Athanasius should support the determination of Mrs Blair to remain at The Wilderness, instead of removing to the Hall. A thousand slight but important indications convinced her that she would do well to entrench

herself at once in a home of her own,—the home assigned to her by the baronet,—and to the support of which, her income of three thousand a-year was fully equal. Her son's assumption of independence rendered it necessary that she should have some regard for her own.

Her explanations with him, however, were neither peevish nor resentful. She had not courage or inclination to oppose any desire expressed by her son; but simply assured him that her presence would one day become a painful restraint; and that should he then make this apparent to herself, painful estrangements between them must necessarily ensue. She promised, meanwhile, to exercise her taste and judgment in the renovation and refurnishing of the Hall, upon which he had insisted; and even to preside there whenever the reception of company made her presence desirable.

Again did Sir Henry Morton interfere, to assure Cressingham that he had the most judicious of mothers, as well as the most discreet of guardians; — while Lord Holmeswell vowed to the gods that, could he have changed the worldly, selfish Lady Maunderwell for the gentle,

disinterested Sophia, *this* time, he would have flung the family diamonds and the home-farm into the lighter scale.

Reginald had no leisure to listen to all these praises. His life, both at Eton and at home, was a round of recreations. He had been too well crammed by McAvoy in his boyhood to find severe application necessary; and between rowing, sailing, cricketing, fishing, hunting, shooting, and a variety of other diversions unsuitable to his years, found life far too pleasant a pastime to take heed of the morrow, or even the afternoon of the passing day.

"Morton and Holmeswell were no doubt right. He did not find either his mother or his guardian much of a bore,—except, the former, when nervous about restive horses,—or the latter, when prosing about the disposal of his borough interest. Old Docket was not so bad a judge of claret, after all. As to his mother—but she was *his* mother, and that was enough!"

As time progressed, the Christmas parties at the Hall became extended in numbers, if not improved in quality. Nothing can be more absurd than to assert the prevalence of a levelling prin-

ciple in our public schools. Lord Maunderwell's son was, of course, called "Holmeswell," and fagged in his turn. But when advancing towards the head of the school, he held his aristocratic place in the little community far more decidedly than in after-life at his club. Neither tutors nor chums forgot for a moment that he was the only son of the Earl of Maunderwell; and quite as little were they disposed to overlook the fact, that his friend Cressingham was in the enjoyment of fifty thousand a-year, good church preferment, and a family mansion where the preserves were excellent and the cellars of high reputation.

The influence and popularity of both was prodigious. It was not without just grounds that Reginald attained at Eton the nickname of the "Heir and many friends." Time was still to prove whether the parody were to hold good throughout; and the unfortunate hare of the fable to find a human representative in the popular young Man of Fortune.

CHAPTER VII.

"Lord of himself—that heritage of woe!
That fearful empire, which the human breast
Holds but to keep the soul within from rest."

BYRON.

FROM that period Reginald Cressingham, like the often-quoted swan of "still St Mary's Lake," floated double. He became Reginald Cressingham and shadow. The *parvenu* guardian, aware that his future consequence must emanate from his ward, strove, by every means in his power, to amalgamate his own existence with that of Reginald; and as in the case of other parasite plants, this intimate junction was of course at the cost of the nobler tree.

Young Cressingham was as rarely to be seen without Athanasius at his heels, as Don Juan without his Leporello. In any other instance,

such intimate companionship might have boded improvement to the younger. But Athanasius was the disciple rather than the master. He knew nothing, except vulgar fractions, more than Reginald; while Reginald, though a school-boy, knew a thousand things that were heathen Greek to the attorney.

The factitious atmosphere and soil engendered by enormous wealth, was bringing forth the usual result. From his infancy the boy had been the sport of fortune; and his faculties, long repressed by her chilling power, were now starting up into exuberant and barren verdure. The branches were wild and fanciful, but fruit was wanting. As little Justina, the orphan grandchild of the vicar of Stoke, was once reproved by grandmamma for her audacity in remarking—"There always seemed to be something make-believe in Reginald."

Nevertheless, four years after his accession of fortune, Cressingham of Stoke Paddocks was pronounced to be the finest gentleman at Oxford. Fine gentlemanism, in its vulgar acceptation, is a fluctuating accomplishment; uncertain as every other mere matter of fashion. To dandyism suc-

ceeds slang,—and from slang, the world of blockheads recurs to dandyism; the turf, the field, the road, cigars, whiskey, or Champagne, being the exceedingly right thing *one* term, and the exceedingly wrong one, the next.

Even scholarship has its turn. When, by rare accident, the popular young Duke or Marquis of Christchurch happens to be marked for an Honour, dunces fall in general estimation; and the fine gentleman for once allows himself to be seen in the livery of the Muses, instead of a bang-up by Stultz, or a *paletot* of Blin.

Some such auspicious influence proved of singular advantage to Reginald Cressingham. Clever men happened to be the order of the day. Two or three young Oxonians had recently distinguished themselves in Parliament, or by writing tolerable verses, or as men of wit and pleasure; and the man who aspired to pleasure *without* wit had consequently fallen in the market. Books were the pet folly in vogue.

Not that there was much danger of such pretenders to literature working their way into *very* severe pedantry. Classical scholarship was too high an aim for these young aspirants. On Cres-

singham's table lay piles of poetry and romance,—of light memoirs and heavy histories; just as, when rouéism was in vogue, his Havannahs had arrived in bales, and his Maraschino in hampers; the wealth which entitled him to play the fool more splendidly than his neighbours, having enabled him to order from a London bookseller a consignment of everything new that came out.

Next, perhaps, to a course of solid reading, under the guidance of a wise preceptor, the most advantageous thing for an intelligent mind is a course of indiscriminate reading, under its own,—as a young dog is best taught to swim by throwing it from a bridge into a current. Cressingham was a young man of excellent if not distinguished abilities. The noise of dissipation was beginning to lose its charm. He had seen almost enough of horses and grooms,—tandem racing and jollification. A serious illness, brought on by excesses of every kind, had confined him to his rooms six dreary weeks; during which he found, enlightened by the failure of his usual reckless and deceptive spirits, the selfish levity of Morton, Holmeswell, and Co., grow insupportable. On his recovery, he became almost as much disgusted

with his previous habits of life, as with the friends from whom they had been imbibed.

Convalescence, meanwhile, inspired a new passion as onerous, if not so perilous to life and limb as a hunting stable. Incapacitated for boisterous enjoyments, he became addicted to whist.—Whist happened to be the thing in vogue; and the capital fellows infesting Cressingham's room, conceiving the young man of fortune entitled to enjoy the thing in vogue in its most costly shape, assured him that a few months' practice would render him the best player at Ch. Ch. Athanasius had no reason to infer, from the demands upon his private account, that the minor had renounced two or three most expensive pursuits, in order to devote himself exclusively to a pleasure, which *he* had been enjoying for years at the modest mulct of half-a-dozen shillings per week!

Such was the origin of Reginald's devotion to study,—if study it could be called. He was now devoted to a sedentary life; drank green tea instead of claret, and took a quiet airing, instead of declaring war upon all the fences in the county. He lived in what *he* called "a little quiet set of his own," and the intervals of the academic tor-

ture indispensable even to Cressingham of Stoke Paddocks, were divided between "What are trumps?" and the hot-pressed literature of St James's street. Precisely such works as my reader has now in his hand, lay heaped, in their Quaker-coloured covers, upon his table, to be lounged over in his dressing-gown, or dozed over upon his damask sofa.

A sort of hero-of-romance existence was accordingly beginning to develop itself to his imagination. He was now nineteen, and singularly good-looking; fair, and scarcely above the common height, yet possessed of so elegant a physiognomy and air, as to merit the appellation of "distinguished," applied in England almost exclusively to the tall and dark; and on the continent, to a pigmy or Albinos, if endowed with nobility of countenance and gesture. There was every reason to anticipate that the Heir with many friends, would shortly become the Heir with many loves.

But it was not alone with reference to his present or future conquests, that Reginald began to find a dangerous delight in the pages of fiction. He was beginning to muse with earnest considera-

tion upon the peculiarities of his situation. Reversing the usual order of things, the circumstances which had converted the boy into a man, were now converting the man into a boy. He was actually bewildered by the discrepancy between his prominent position in the world, and his imperfectly developed sentiments and feelings.

No parallel presented itself for his singular fortunes. There were just then at Oxford one or two contemporaries, in the enjoyment of prospects as brilliant as his own. But these had been the fruit of inheritance,—soberly descending from sire to son, and shackled by the usual impediments of aristocratic connection,—formal dowagers,—and the adamantine fetters of pedigree and pride. Not one of them but was a slave to duties arising out of the Crusades. Not one of them but was a mere link of the human chain extending from the Norman Conquest to the last dying speech of English monarchy, whose destiny probably resembles that of the phœnix;—to expire only that a brighter bird of the same species, of more brilliant plumage and greater force of pinion, may arise from its ashes. Not one of them was free, like *him*, to choose a

wife,—to choose a party,—to choose a destination.

His position was unique, in short, save in the pages of the novelist; and it was there accordingly that young Cressingham sought for sympathy and precedent. It was there he read of heroes sinking under the gifts of fortune,—young, handsome, accomplished, — (and discontented) — as himself. It was there he introduced himself to ideal heroines, Matildas or Geraldines, fancying himself alternately a Pelham or a Vivian Grey, — a Granby or a Gerfaut;—the Lord Glenmore or Clarence Hervey of Miss Edgeworth, or the Arthur of the alcoholic pages of Balzac, Frédéric Soulié, or Eugène Sue.

Reginald could not forbear smiling when it one day presented itself to his mind that, for once, he had distanced the emulation of Docket. Hitherto, at an humble distance, Athanasius had trod in all his footsteps. Since the epoch of the establishment of the will and the re-organization of the household at the Hall, the wily guardian had instinctively become knowing in horseflesh, discriminating in wine, an epicure, a connoisseur, —nay, almost a dandy, for the jeers of Morton and

Holmeswell had induced him to change the cut of his garments just as the habits of Reginald compelled him to alter his stake from sixpenny points to pounds. But the angular Beau Shatterley of fifty-five was scarcely likely to fancy himself into a Sir Charles Grandison, or to interfere with the loves and graces of his ward. But though he had distanced the attorney, he was far from being alone in his glory. There were still Mortons and Holmeswells neck and neck with him in the career of romanticism, as formerly in that of sportsmanship and dissipation. So long as a young man in *his* position chose to become the founder of a school, no likelihood of any want of disciples. A genteel melancholy *à la* Cressingham became the right thing;—a genteel melancholy enlivened by fits and starts of artificial wit.

Because Cressingham of Stoke Paddocks fancied himself satiated, at nineteen, with the pleasures of life, the youth of Ch. Ch. assumed an air of picturesque languor, and tried to subdue their joyous impulses of health and spirits to the elegant philosophy of a Jacques in his teens, in the enjoyment of fifty thousand a year;—till Göttingen or Jena would have been puzzled to produce

a more dreamy race of illuminati than those who filled up the intervals of Cressingham's nightly whist, by prating mysticism and mouthing verses to imaginary Mignons.

"And what was Cress doing when you left Oxford?" inquired Morton, of Lord Holmeswell, —the former of whom had six months the start of Reginald at Eton and Oxford, and the latter a year.

"Not much worth speaking of, I fancy. But I have not been near him this winter. Cress is grown a regular spooney. Oxford is not what it was in your time. But Cress is the cursedest spooney of them all."

"He was getting tolerably soft before *I* left," resumed Morton; "had sold off his hunters, and was setting up for a reading man! Now 'pon my soul one can't stand a man in Cress's position dwindling into a reading man! Very well for such fellows as Percy,—(Percy of Maudlin I mean.) Percy is a younger son, without a guinea, and has his way to make in Parliament. I can forgive Percy."

"I fancy it was he who first bit Cress with this sentimental turn," observed Holmeswell.

"Cress, you know, never had an idea of his own! Don't you remember what a mammy-sick, apron-string animal it was, when it came to Eton? *You* took him in hand, and *I* did what I could with him; but if it had not been for *us*, he would have continued to ride like a tailor and dress like a tailor's apprentice to the day of judgment.—By heaven, I have still on my conscience that mulberry-coloured coat with silver buttons of the old attorney's, which you chose Cress to adopt—after you had figured in one at the boat-race till laughed out of countenance, and which the guardian copied from his ward, as the right thing."

"After all, what an absurd mishmash it all was, down at that place of Cressingham's!" — added Morton, laughing. "Such cursed roads and such a detestable neighbourhood."—

"And then the housekeeper-mother and Lawyer Endless of a guardian;—and Cress, with all the vulgar tastes and ambitions of a *parvenu*. For after all, he *is* a *parvenu*. He inherits his estate from the mother's side, who, quizzy as she is, has gentle blood in her veins. But the father was a nothing, I fancy,—neither family nor

fortune. Old Cressingham, the grandfather, never saw her again, you know, after the match."

"Yet Cress is as proud as a peacock," observed Morton.

"*Purse* proud," added Lord Holmeswell, shrugging his shoulders. "If there be a thing on earth incomprehensible to *me*, it is purse pride!"—

Sir Henry Morton, though secretly of opinion that there were many things on earth equally incomprehensible to the young Viscount, and that there was little merit in not being proud of a purse, containing less than a groat, readily assented. They agreed in voting Cress a sad, silly, conceited, vulgar fellow, who would never possess a real friend, or come to good in the world; though neither thought it necessary to admit to the other the amount of I. O. Us. bearing his signature, deposited, among other family archives, in Reginald's deed-chest at Stoke Paddocks,—as completely dead letters as the correspondence amassed by his predecessor.

It was, perhaps, some suspicion of these weighty obligations which induced Mrs Blair to give a decided preference to the new order of associates who thronged to Stoke Paddocks during the fol-

lowing vacation. They were at least quieter in their deportment and more decent in their habits than the *roués*, whose excesses were still the wonder of the country round. Under these auspices, the library became the favoured region of the house. Just as the cultivation of the stables and cellars distinguished the reign of Morton and Holmeswell, did the appointment of a librarian and the rescue of a family collection of the highest order, attest the more enlightened influence of Percy of Maudlin.

"I am heartily glad that Sir Henry Morton has ceased to come here," observed his mother to Reginald, one day, when the departure of his guests had left him, for a single day at the mercy of The Wilderness. "There was an insolence in his manner which I always wondered how you could endure?"

"Not *insolence*, — the mere *sangfroid* of fashionable life, my dear mother," replied Reginald. "Harry Morton felt towards me as a brother, and used as little ceremony."

"I do not know how you may understand the feelings of a brother," persisted Mrs Blair with a smile, "but I can assure you that Mr Docket

once overheard him in the billiard room mimicking and quizzing you to Lord Holmeswell, in the most unhandsome manner."

"A man capable of listening to conversation not intended for him to hear, is quite as capable of misrepresenting it afterwards," observed Reginald, drily.

"It was only in your interests, my dear boy, that he noticed to me the duplicity of these pretended friends," added Mrs Blair, repenting her indiscretion.

"Docket is a very obliging person, and, I believe, attached to us," said Cressingham haughtily, after a pause; "but the last person in the world to institute himself a judge of anything connected with the habits and manners of the world. If I find him making impertinent remarks upon my friends (for Morton and Holmeswell are my friends,—I may have chosen to see less of them lately, but I have the greatest regard for both), I shall take an early opportunity of requesting him to find some other residence than Stoke."

"I was much to blame to say a syllable to you on the subject," faltered Mrs Blair. "He spoke confidentially. I had no right to repeat what was

intrusted to me. I intreat you, therefore, to think no more on the subject."

In her eagerness to avoid the part of a mischief-maker between Reginald and his guardian, she resolved to seal her lips for the future. Could she have convicted young Percy and his clique of even caricaturing their partial host, upon the attorney's showing, she would have been cautious of disclosing their treachery to her son.

As usual, therefore, in his situation, he was left to rock himself in the happy dream of being an object of intense affection to all surrounding him. With pleasing credulity, he believed that the favoured individuals whom he had so long supplied with horses, dogs, and cigars, cherished for him the same disinterested attachment as those who assured him that his verses were Byronic, and his aspirations as sublime as they were original.

As Mrs Blair observed, however, the habits derived from this new ascendancy were less prejudicial to his purse, health, and reputation, than those of the *roués*. Both guardian and mother promoted his present refined pursuits, and applauded the change as a reformation; and whatever Docket gave forth was as religiously echoed by

the subordinates of Stoke Paddocks, as a psalm from the singing gallery of Stoke church responded to the giving out of the parish clerk.

Dr Chaffles, who, as little daring to beset young Cressingham with advice as his former patron, Sir Giles, had invariably crept to The Wilderness with a chapter of lamentations in his pocket the day after Reginald's departure for Eton or Oxford, now appeared with congratulations on the exquisite graces of mind and manners developed in his young friend. It was only little Justina who presumed to express, not to Mrs Blair, but to Reginald himself, her complete disapproval.

"Grandpapa has given me a pony," said she one day, when they met accidentally in the village. "Some day or other, you must take me out with you. I want you to teach me to leap. Jasper is a frisky little thing, and goes over a grip famously."

It was, perhaps, because unambitious of officiating as esquire to a Dulcinea of twelve years old, that Reginald coolly informed her he had almost given up riding, and had scarcely a saddle horse in his stables.

"Just like you!"—retorted the laughing girl.

"You have always begun at the wrong end of everything, and you always will!—When you were a boy and ought to have been playing cricket, nothing would do but horses, nothing but battues! —Now you are a man and strong enough to enjoy a sportsman's pleasures, you have turned book-worm. Good bye, Mr Cressingham!—I wonder whether it will ever suit you to turn a reasonable being!"—

More than once did this random and saucy remark of a mere child, recur to the recollection of Reginald Cressingham.

"Well, well! I fancy I am not much more inconsistent than others of my age," was his secret conclusion, after having meditated one day with serious self-reproaches upon his infirmity of purpose. "It is only my power of realizing the whims and fancies conceived by other men that renders my versatility so conspicuous. Tina is right, however. As Voltaire says, people who scorn to enjoy the pleasures of their age, are pretty sure of a double portion of pains!"

CHAPTER VIII.

Where the red wine-cup floweth, there art thou!
When luxury curtains out the evening sky;
Triumphant mirth sits flush'd upon thy brow,
And ready laughter lurks within thine eye.

MRS NORTON.

EVEN had Reginald's instances to his mother to become an inmate of his new residence in Hamilton place been of a very eager nature, Mrs Blair would have resisted. Of an inert disposition, her constitution, enfeebled by early anxieties, had fallen into premature decay. She was now a confirmed invalid—the slave of old Drench the apothecary; who, with wary foresight, assured her that the atmosphere of London would be fatal to her impaired health, and that she could not do better than remain a fixture at Stoke.

But young Cressingham was *not* particularly anxious that she should accept the presidency over

his new establishment. He was aware that her habits of life fitted her better for the country; and that his own were incompatible with domestic subservience.—Early independence had worked its usual evils.—He was capricious, inconsistent, and wayward, and though his natural intelligence rendered him fully conscious of his own caprice, waywardness, and inconsistency, he regarded them as a portion of the pleasures of youth and prosperity allotted to his enjoyment, not as faults to be amended by time.

Though four months were still to elapse previous to the attainment of his majority, he was nearly as much the master of his property as if already of age. The rein was held so lightly by Docket and his mother, that, with the exception of knowing that his accounts were not to be looked over till the ensuing month of August, he had no reason to suppose himself a minor. Money was always forthcoming on his demand; — bills or creditors, never.

It was this, perhaps, which imparted to the nominal fifty thousand a year of young Cressingham, a value almost ideal.—He was spending at the rate of twice that amount, yet experienced

no inconvenience from the excess; — till he was beginning to *feel*, if not to *think* himself in possession of Fortunatus's purse.—A sovereign on the throne would scarcely have had a more unlimited command of money.

"What a lucky dog you are, Cress, to have brought up your governor so well!"—observed Sir Henry Morton, who lounged in with Holmeswell to breakfast with Reginald, one fine May morning, in order to inspect his new household, and ascertain what good was to be extracted out of their quondam friend.—"My blackguard kept me on bread and water all the time I was at college; — an allowance of eight hundred a year, while *your* people seem to let you do as you like."—

"To be sure," observed Lord Holmeswell.—"What has the old attorney to gain by thwarting him? *Your* guardian was your nearest of kin.—Had you died in your minority, the savings would have gone to *him*."

"That was something, perhaps. But the deuce of it was, that instead of keeping them in a floating sum, to grease my wheels at starting in life, my uncle Francis chose to invest them every year

in land.—What did I want with more land?—To be sure, he improved my income. But what signifies a few hundreds a year, compared with the command of twenty thousand pounds on first entering the world?"—

Lord Holmeswell, stinted to an allowance of five hundred a year, sighed at these allusions to thousands of pounds; an aggregation which, for years to come, he was very little likely to compass, unless through the hands of the Jews.

"Ay, ay!—you are both lucky dogs," said he. "If *you* were kept down and kept close as I am, you would no longer wonder at having heard me express my regret at Oxford that men could not be born orphans. By the way, Cress, what has become of Mrs Blair?"—

"My mother spends the season in the country," replied Reginald, gravely. "She is neither young nor gay enough for London life."

"By heavens, I never heard of so exemplary a woman," cried Morton; "you must have had her built on purpose for you!—By the way, this Cressingham man, who is going to stand for Wilsbury, must be a nephew of hers, I think?"—

"What Cressingham man?"

"They are people with a place near Reading."

"My grandfather lived at Manny Park," observed Reginald, with a rising colour, for a thousand painful reminiscences had long caused all mention of the name to cease at Stoke Paddocks; the infirm health of Mrs Blair having, in fact, originated the shock of learning that the decision in favour of her son's succession to the family property had been the source of loss of reason to her father.

"But surely this young fellow cannot be your uncle?" persisted Morton, not noticing Cressingham's disinclination to talk upon the subject.

"My uncle's son, I should imagine. My mother had an only brother, who died young, in some dragoon regiment in India. He left children. A son of his is in the enjoyment, I fancy, of the family estate. I know nothing of any of them. There have been law-suits and family feuds. I was not aware that my cousin was old enough to enter into public life."

"I was staying with Ned Finch, near Wilsbury, when Cressingham wrote to canvass him, in the event of a general election."

"Well?"

"The name struck me—and his priggish style of writing still more. I asked if he were a relation of yours;—nobody seemed to know more of him than that he had property in Berkshire, and was an out-and-out Tory."

"They all behaved infamously to my mother," said Reginald, "and would have cut my throat could they have done so within limit of the law. I trust we may never meet, that I may be spared the trouble of showing them how thoroughly I despise them."

"Some day or other, you may chance to cough each other down in parliament," observed Holmeswell. "Are you as red-hot a radical as ever?"—

"Time enough to trouble myself about politics a year or two hence," replied Cressingham, not choosing perhaps to be catechised by one so ill-qualified for the task of catechisation.

His curiosity, however, was painfully excited by this allusion to a man bearing his name and owning his blood, to whom he was to be as a stranger.—Already, Reginald had begun to be alive to the value of connexion in London life. Notwithstanding the flippant allusions of his gay associates, he saw that those whose families,

strengthened by a thousand aristocratic ramifications, formed the ground-work of fashionable society, held a place there unattainable by the mere force of wealth.—Wherever Holmeswell and Morton showed their fastidious faces, they were surrounded by their own people.—Hands were extended towards *them*, which not even the force of their impertinence could alienate. If unpunctual in their engagements, or ungracious in their allusions, among the Countesses in diamond necklaces, and Lady Helens in garlands of roses, their aunts and cousins, towards whom Cressingham felt compelled to use the ceremonious courtesies of life, there was always an apology for *them*.—"It was just like Holmeswell!"—or "it was only Harry's way!"—

When Cressingham, on the contrary, entered a room, he felt it to be arrayed in severe judgment against him. No indulgent aunt—no affectionate cousins—no influential kinsman to bespeak indulgence for the new man!—With the exception of half-a-dozen young *roués*, who found it convenient to have a monied friend who could mount them and give them dinners at the Clarendon, not one to say "God save him!" and amid the stir and

animation of London life, he felt indescribably more lost than in his isolated country house.—He was surprised to find himself of so little consequence.—Having been taught by Docket to imagine that his Oxford popularity and Stoke Paddocks importance must pursue him into the haunts of the great world, he could scarcely understand how he came to be a grain of sand, though a golden one, in the wilderness.

London is a sad leveller of exorbitant pretensions,—and sturdy must be the self-conceit which can stand out against its millions of battering rams!—In London, no supremacy can be really supreme. Persons of great wealth or eminent birth command a noble position as regards the upgazing multitude. But to their equals, or all but equals, there infallibly exists some qualifying circumstance of personal defect, or ancestral deterioration, some crack or flaw, some blot, moral or physical, which keeps down undue hauteur and causes the malice of the envious to triumph.

Vain-glorious people should content themselves with the pomposity of their country seats.—Reginald Cressingham, monarch at the Hall of all he surveyed, and arbitrary as a Persian Prince,

if he did not exactly expect in London the deference tendered to him in his servile neighbourhood, was not prepared for the thousand modes in which his boyish vanity would have to suffer.—After all, he was but the "rich Cressingham,"—a well-born man—yet still qualified only by the voice of the world as the "rich Cressingham."—He had no prudence, no pride of place. — A late noble and eccentrece *gourmand* used to say, that the only advantage of being a peer, was being helped first to fish.—There are a thousand similar distinctions to which his lordship's age probably rendered him insensible, but to which Reginald was painfully alive. His rare distinctions of fortune had placed him in a rank of society where it was impossible for him to be foremost; nay, it frequently happened that he was the only man in a dinner party unprivileged by birth.—He could not help fancying, with the soreness of self-sufficiency, that, on such occasions, certain of the young lordships and poor honourables over whom, in every other time and place, his opulence assigned him such high pre-eminence, triumphed in the occasion of seeing him bring up the rear, alone, while they were

pairing off with smiling beauties.—Though in all probability his want of social rank never occurred to a single person among those with whom habit rendered such honours a matter of course, he suspected that Holmeswell and Morton, and more especially a certain Gerald Langley, the younger brother of the Earl of Ashleigh, who now represented the former suitor of his mother, delighted in pomposing over his head.

In the latter instance, perhaps, he was not wholly mistaken; for Langley was a striking specimen of the saucy boy engendered by a precocious introduction into London life; and the Earl his brother, an amiable unaffected young man, seemed to have assigned to him, among the other labours of cadetship, that of giving himself airs. Sprightly and malicious, no sooner did he discover the foible of Cressingham, than he paid him off all his old Eton and Oxford grudges, by practising upon his infirmity.

"Believe me, I am most unaffectedly sorry to hear of this disagreeable business," said he, taking Reginald familiarly by the arm, as they issued from the Opera-house the first night of the season.

"*What* business?" demanded Cressingham, in some surprise—having flattered himself that with Athanasius and his mother at a distance of forty miles, so nauseous a word might be effaced from his vocabulary.

"*What* business?—Oh!—I am very sorry I mentioned it—I did not think it would annoy you."

"I have not the most remote idea of what you are talking," interrupted Reginald, in utter surprise.

"Then we will say no more about the matter."

"Indeed I hope you will, for you leave me in the greatest perplexity," persisted Reginald.

"I mean about this blackballing. Pray forgive me for the allusion. But as a friend——"

"*What* blackballing?—*Who* has been blackballed?" demanded Reginald.

Gerald Langley stopped short, and affected to stare at his companion.

"You seem very much amazed," resumed Cressingham. "Surely you can have no objection to explain yourself?"

"None in the world, if you *really* desire it. The fact is, that the whole house was talking to

me of your having been blackballed at the Travellers, and politely declined by the Omnibus."

"The Travellers?—I have not been even put up yet at the Travellers! With respect to the Omnibus, as you are aware that I have a box of my own for the season——"

"*That* was considered confirmation of the report. No *young* man, they fancied, would do so tigerish a thing as have a sulky of his own, if he were able to get into either of the Omnibus sets. Somebody consequently reported that you had applied for Harry Gordon's place (who does not return from Naples this season), and that there had been a general veto."

"I should be very glad to discover who has presumed to take so great and unwarrantable a liberty with my name!" cried Cressingham, firing up.

"My dear fellow, when you are a little more used to London, you will discover that everybody takes liberties with everybody's name, particularly with that of a new man, like yourself. Your splendours have taken people by surprise. They were not prepared for you. Your family not having resided in town——"

"They will find themselves mistaken if they fancy that, new to London as I may be, I shall pass over any impertinence of the kind," interrupted Cressingham, earnestly.

"My dear Cress!" interrupted Gerald Langley in his turn—enchanted to find that the young lion was chafed to his satisfaction—"allow me to take the privilege of a friend, and give you a word of advice. Beware how you betray this kind of susceptibility, or you will bring these false rumours actually to pass. Nothing so generally detested as a touchy man. No one in good society troubles himself about the *on dits* of the world. On the contrary, such attacks, like bird-pecks on fruit, are accepted as an evidence of personal merit. A man who has no enemy is one who does not deserve to have a friend. Give and take is the order of the day; and unless you can bear badgering, you will do well to go and bury yourself at once at Stoke Meadows, with that attorney fellow of yours, and be toadied from one end of the year to the other——"

"Stoke Paddocks," emended Cressingham, in an under tone.

"Ay—Maddox; I forgot the name of your

place,—though I have not forgotten the capital Burgundy you gave us when Ashleigh and I came over to shoot with you at Christmas."

"But what could possibly have given rise to the report that I had been rejected where I never had the least idea of making an application? I know none of the Omnibus set."

"Precisely; which is so singular a thing, that it was naturally supposed you might wish to make your way among them."

"For what purpose, when I can enjoy a box of my own?"—

"Oh! oh!—a box of your own compared with the company of the best fellows in town!"

"I have no doubt I might be one of them the very first vacancy," cried Cressingham, beginning to feel dreadfully ashamed of the excellent box for which he had paid five hundred guineas for the season.

"For heaven's sake, don't say *that*," said Gerald earnestly, "or a party will be made against you immediately! The fact is, that neither you nor I could do anything of the kind. There are too many pre-existing claims."

Cressingham flinched at the "you or *I*,"

assuming a parity of pretensions between himself and Lord Ashleigh's younger brother.

"I am but a boy," added Gerald, perceiving his annoyance. "This is only my second season in town; and I am too much in fear of being snubbed and getting unpopular, to thrust myself into places where I know I am not wanted. As to *you*——"

"Well! — as to *me*?"—demanded Reginald, finding his companion stop short.

"As to *you*, then, since you will have it,—all those fellows about town—but why trouble ourselves about them?—Do you think it will rain to-night?"—

"With this frost?—absurd!—What about these fellows, as you call them, about town?"—

"Only that I am afraid they are rather shy of you."

"And why pray?"—

"Because they have an idea that you are bookish. Your Oxford reputation had the start of you here,—and there was no one to take your part. It is a deuced bad thing for a man who happens not to be at all known, to come out in London with the name of being serious, or a pedant, or

a prig, or anything of that kind. Percy of Maudlin, was a regular bookworm, and people were afraid—but it is no use talking about it. I dare say you will do something, some day or other, to convince the world that you are not dunced by too much learning, or starched by too much propriety. Meanwhile, if you never *were* put up at the Travellers, or proposed for the Bus, of course the blackballing story falls to the ground."

Cressingham, with a husky voice, now began in his turn to talk of the weather. He was inexpressibly provoked. The vast personal importance ascribed to him by his guardian had not prepared him for slights so wholly unprovoked. He felt convinced that Gerald Langley had not told him all. He was beginning London life with the reputation of being a bore.—What was the use of having forty thousand a year, if it did not preserve him from the reputation of being a bore!—

"Justina was right!—I am too grave for my age," mused he. "For the last year, I have read too much. Reading incapacitates a man for society, and gives him an awkward pre-occupied air, which these people have mistaken for pedantry. They fancy I pride myself on my acquirements,—when,

in fact, no man living can think less highly of himself. Well! sooner than pass for a rustic, I suppose I must do at Rome as Romans do."

Now the doings of Romans at Rome, that is, of fashionables in London, though apparently as ostensible as the sun at noonday, were a mystery to Reginald.—He attached too much importance to the outward shows of things. To keep up a splendid establishment in a fashionable quarter of the town, was, he fancied, almost enough. When presented to the families of the Earl of Maunderwell, and a few others of his intimates, he had not the remotest idea how to make himself acceptable among them. His manners were shy, without being diffident; and in trying to conceal his *gaucherie* he often lapsed into ill-breeding; for the moment people cease to be natural, they incur the hazard of becoming vulgar.

He was stung to the quick by the hint thrown out by Gerald Langley, that his personal consequence was not very highly appreciated. The often-repeated lesson of the attorney, to beware of the attentions likely to be forced upon him in the world, as evidence of the evil designs of marrying young ladies and borrowing young men, had

prepared him for a very different position. He saw that there was not quite so much occasion as he had expected for placards against trespassers, either on his time or purse.—With the exception of obsequious shopkeepers seeking his custom, no one invaded his premises. Nobody proposed to him, — nobody spunged upon him. His dinners were voted a bore by those whose vote was worth having; and his fashionable young friends had horses and cabriolets of their own.

Apprehensive that people scarcely understood the extent of his fortune, he now began to overact his part, with a view of bringing down the plaudits of the galleries;—mounted equipages on a vulgarly brilliant scale, and bought off the French cook of a fashionable club. A dangerous attempt!—When it was discovered how many people had been inquiring the name of the man in the park whose harness was so gorgeous, and it was rumoured by Morton and Langley that, in spite of the merits of the new *chef*, there had been two vacant covers at Cress's last dinner, further whispers arose that "it was a sad pity poor Cress was likely to prove such a failure!"

Like a feeble singer rendering his debility apparent by the exaggeration of his efforts, Reginald, vexed and restless with labouring to put a good face upon the matter, fell into further grimaces.—Resolved that his dinners *should* succeed and his house be voted a pleasant one, he invited persons renowned for their agreeability, with whom the extent of his acquaintance did not warrant so great a liberty!

The man who places himself in a position to have his advances rejected by another, becomes his inferior. Two of the leading fashionables of the day were known to have refused Mr Cressingham's invitations in a tone of supercilious surprise, and from that time, the parasites of fashionable life spoke of him slightingly; — found fault with his taste, and by the scarcely perceptible shrugs and smiles which say so much and so little, begat a general impression that the man whose tastes were thus gaudy, and whose disregard for the conventional forms of society arose from no superiority of genius, must have the instincts if not the condition of a *parvenu*.

"Yes! I believe he is a man of good family.

But I know nothing about him. Nobody knows anything about him," was a sufficient sentence of disparagement when uttered at a dandy club, by men without one qualification of intrinsic merit, either of heart or head, to impart value to their condemnation! and inflict humiliation on the condemned!—

CHAPTER IX.

Wouldst thou be singled out by partial Heaven,
The One to whom a cloudless lot is given?
Look round the world, and see what fate is there
Which justice can pronounce exempt from care.
Hon. Mrs Norton.

Poor Reginald! — Poor rich man! — The kindlier qualities of his nature were gradually disappearing. He had been taught Greek, Latin, and French, mathematics and rhetoric. He had been sent to church on Sundays, and to school and college the year round. But not one single lesson that really strengthens the understanding, refines the taste, or warms the heart, had ever been imparted; — Nurse Adams was the last person who, in his days of dependency, had inculcated precepts of humanity; and those of the attorney had since so effaced that better influence, that his egotism was a mere matter of submission to

those in authority over him. His heart had become indurated by maxims of worldly wisdom. —If any interstices existed, they were becoming inflated by the puffing up of worldly vanity.—

But vanity does not imply self-reliance; and the susceptibility which exposed him to the rubs of the envious was sufficiently galled to render him wretched. Among those by whom his invitations had been rejected, was Lord Ashleigh, —a man who, having nothing to obtain from the addition of a wealthy man to his acquaintance, saw no inducement to throw himself into a circle so uncertain in its composition as that of the rich Cressingham.

The earl belonged to an order of people peculiarly steadfast and regular in their social orbit. The son of a country-gentleman-peer, a rigid conservative, a squire in all but his patent, young Ashleigh had been habituated from early boyhood to see the same faces, and hear the same subjects treated with the same consideration, arising from undeviating principles and firmly-rooted prejudices. Himself both intelligent and enlightened, he was satisfied to take the pleasures of life in an easy way, and the duties of life in an

earnest; seeking no excessive excitements,—regarding society as a gentle and improving relaxation after much study or much business.—He was not fond of being startled by the new or strange, but preferred the company of people whose persons and connexions were known to him, to the showy set which lent its forced vivacity or exuberant fashion to the dinner-table in Hamilton Place.

No suspicion, however, would have crossed the mind of Reginald that Lord Ashleigh's plausible excuse of a prior engagement was a supposititious one, but for the bitter insinuations of Gerald.—

"Why didn't you tell me you were going to invite Ashleigh?" said he; "I would have spared you the vexation of ——. Oh! he was engaged, he *said* he was engaged, did he? — Well, no matter!—But once for all, believe *me*, Ashleigh is quite impracticable.—He lives in his own set, with people of his own kind with those antecedents he is familiar. He *won't* mix with strangers!"

Reginald felt his cheeks burn and his ears tingle, but was at a loss for a retort to put an end to the vexatious commentaries of his companion.

"Ashleigh is only to be tempted out of his own circle by a great reputation. I don't mean flashy fellows like Growlingford, or men who trade upon their learning like your friend Percy;—I mean a man promising to be efficiently useful in public life. Our Berkshire neighbour, for instance, your cousin, the clever Cressingham; Ashleigh enjoys nothing better than a *tête-à-tête* dinner with *him* and a dumb waiter in the Albany."—

The arrow struck home as it was intended. Reginald saw that his cousin was called the "clever Cressingham" to distinguish him from the "rich Cressingham," and the name of the "rich Cressingham" became hateful to him.

"Lord Ashleigh is perfectly right," said he, affecting a tone of candour. "Nothing so pleasant as a friendly sociable dinner, and I trust no one is more alive to the charm than myself. But I enjoy a sociable dinner *with* a friend. It is only men like Lord Ashleigh with whom I have not an opinion in common, that I ever wish to see *en masse* under my roof, at a set dinner party."

"Ay, but that was precisely where you failed. Had you invited him with men who share his

habits and opinions, *en masse*, as you describe, he would probably have come. But such fellows as Growlingford! — Such people as Sir Henry Morton and Lord Robert Leigh!—a noisy vulgar fellow like Robert Leigh, who, were he not the son of a Marquis——"

"Well, well,—we will say no more on the subject," interrupted Cressingham, with a heightened colour. "Robert Leigh and Morton are my friends. We shall, I trust, survive our disappointment of the honour of Lord Ashleigh's company."

"And the more so as you are sure of my majesty's;—who, I flatter myself, am twice as amusing," cried Gerald, trying to laugh off the irritation he had wantonly stirred up. "By the way, there is a cousin of mine always boring me to introduce him to you,—Courtfield,—I dare say you know him by sight?—"

"Courtfield?" repeated Reginald, looking grave and ignorant,—preparing to decline the acquaintance as some sort of retaliation upon the slight shown him by Lord Ashleigh. "Courtfield?—No,— I know nothing about him."—

"I thought you probably knew him, because the Duke of Granton, his father, has property in your county."

"The Duke of Granton, of course, I know perfectly by sight and reputation," replied Cressingham, at once annoyed and gratified. "I was not aware that his son was in the world. I shall be delighted to make his acquaintance. He is almost a neighbour of mine. Pray invite him to come on Thursday, in the place your brother has left vacant."—

Gerald bit his lip to conceal a smile; and when Lord Courtfield accompanied him to Cressingham's dinner party, he turned out to be a Westminster boy!—For this, however, he did not feel accountable to Cress. It was the business of the host to have been fully aware of the fact.

By one or two more blunders of this description, a ridicule began to be attached to Cressingham's parties. It was said that he had nothing about him but "a pack of boys." Established London men will not compromise themselves by appearing among "a pack of boys." The boys, left to themselves, out-boyed their boyishness; and without the smallest taste for disreputable orgies

or vulgar sprees, Reginald found himself more than once disgraced by the consequences of frolics, which distinguished the "rich Cressingham" from the "clever Cressingham" more disadvantageously than ever.

The newspapers, bribed to discretion, became of course unbribably indiscreet. The young man of fortune was now and then admonished in italics that there was one law in moral England for the rich and for the poor;—and the great world, on finding the handsome young man whose equipages were so gaudy, thus painfully reproved, expressed its fastidious regret that a man of Cressingham's fortune should have fallen into so bad a set.

To be in a bad set, in the world in which it was his weak ambition to shine, is as fatal an imputation as the impress of the branding iron. From almost any other stigma he might have redeemed himself. But for a man to all appearance able to exercise an independant choice to have chosen so ill, could only arise from the instincts of a vulgar taste; few people being magnanimous enough to make allowance for the force of circumstances in the destinies of others.

While Reginald was experiencing these unlooked for mortifications, and discovering that the draught of hyssop is not the less bitter from being quaffed in a golden chalice, Mrs Blair, in the languid intervals of indisposition, was becoming impatient of his absence, and eager for further insight into his proceedings than could be obtained from notices of his dinner parties in the Morning Post.

But not even from his guardian, could she extract a word of intelligence concerning him whose infancy had been so dear to her,—whose boyhood so anxious.—

Mrs Chaffles and one or two other country neighbours, in their occasional morning visits, attempted in vain to vary their inquiries after her aches and pains, real and imaginary, with questions concerning the pleasures of London, and the part taken in them by him whom they considered its leading personage. The gentle invalid had nothing to relate. Reginald's letters made no allusion to balls or drawing rooms. She knew no more of what are called the gaieties of the season, than little Justina. The utmost she was able to report, a mere echo of steward's-room gossip,

regarded the extent and splendour of the establishment in Hamilton place.

"I suppose, ma'am, we shall soon be having a lady at the Hall?" was one of the favourite interrogations of the Vicaress.—"Surely so handsome a young man as Mr Cressingham, and so great a match, will scarcely be let alone by the London chaperons!"

"I trust he will wait. He has plenty of time. My son has seen nothing of the world," was the evasive reply of Mrs Blair, who did not care to acknowledge how totally she was in the dark as to his projects or predilections.—"At present, he can scarcely know his own mind on such subjects."

"He never will know it," murmured Justina, who was turning over the leaves of a gorgeously bound Annual on the table near them, one of the unmeaning, valueless gifts of Reginald to his mother—"because he knows nothing that is not told him by other people."—

No one listened—no one replied to the little girl's suggestion; and her elder but less intelligent companions concluded she was muttering words of kindness to the spaniel nestling at her feet.

"To own the truth, my dear ma'am, I was inquiring of Mr Docket, when he came back from town the other day, what likelihood there was of Mr Cressingham's settling," added the Vicar's lady, with a half-confidential air. "But not a word could I get out of him!—He could talk only of Mr Cressingham's French cook, Mr Cressingham's Opera-box, and Mr Cressingham's new chariot and curricle. To be sure it *does* seem odd to hear a man of poor Mr Docket's age and education giving his opinion upon such matters; and quite as much out of the way as my inquiry if there was anything like matrimony in the wind, which made him so angry."

"Mr Docket considered, perhaps, that during Reginald's minority, the less such things are dwelt upon the better. Besides, however valuable a friend, he is not exactly the confidant a young man like my son would choose on such an occasion."

"Mr Cressingham is never likely to choose a confidant," again muttered Justina.—"He will always fancy he is choosing, and submit to be chosen. He does not understand the meaning of independence."

Mrs Blair was not sorry, meanwhile, to perceive that her son's guardian had been as little communicative with others as herself on the chapter of his observations in London. From a certain air of reserve assumed by Athanasius on his return home, she had apprehended that he was in possession of some secret concerning Reginald:—that more had been confided to him than he had authority to relate.

It was not likely that a man so artful as the attorney should admit, either to others or herself, that his visit to the "rich Cressingham" in Hamilton place, was a very different thing from his visits to his ward at Stoke Paddocks; that in London, the power of his wand had departed. At the Hall, Docket was the fountain head of Reginald's pleasures and pursuits. In London, he was only an artful attorney, by whose guardianship the wealthy minor was grievously hampered. Such persons as Lord Robert Leigh and Sir Henry Morton had not been slow in instructing the "rich Cressingham" in the usual ruinous modes of circumventing the authority of a guardian; and Reginald, whose heart was now thoroughly divested of any amiable weakness that

might have blinded him to the want of principle of his guardian, now treated him with the disregard sure to arise from disrespect. Conscious that no small portion of his social disadvantages arose from the want of consideration of those in authority over him, he visited upon Docket the slights he was receiving. It was a relief to the evil feelings engendered by the unfair usage of society, to vent upon a self-sufficient inferior the fastidious impertinence he was acquiring in so bad a school.

The attorney had not a foot of ground on which to make a stand against the aggressions of his ward. To obtain an influence over the boy, he had flung aside all pretension to the dignities of virtue, and the young man profited by the frailties thus left exposed. Docket's authority was now nominal. Reginald had learned the secret of obtaining money without his concurrence; and the guardian who, for his own purposes, had been so long indulgent, could not suddenly assume the severe privileges of virtue.

There was consequently covert war between them. Though the same familiarity existed, on the side of Reginald it was tempered by scarcely dis-

guised jeers; while, on that of the guardian, it assumed the agonised ease with which the keeper at a zoological show thrusts his head into the mouth of the lion, or fondles the paw of the hyena, as an exhibition to strangers.

Cressingham was more amused than he had been during the last few months of noisy orgies or laborious festivities, by the unaffected amazement of Athanasius at the luxurious splendour of his domestic arrangements.

For the last few years, intercourse with fashionable tradesmen had, in some degree, familiarized the attorney with the progress of such matters; and he had consequently affected to give his opinion, if not the law, to his ward. But he was now startled into an admission of utter ignorance. He knew not either by name or nature the innumerable objects of luxury,—the rare wines,—the curious dishes,—paraded before him. To take refuge in disparagement, according to the system of Gerald Langley, was out of the question; nor would he affect to spartanize against effeminacy and enervation, for it was he who, by cultivating such frivolous tastes in Reginald, had striven to entangle him in the golden meshes of

his own fortune. But he came back from London to Stoke, irritated and mortified at finding himself of such small account; and the contempt he had ever entertained for the feeble purposes and vacillating mind of his ward began to take the form of dislike. From the first, the interests of Reginald had been secondary to his own; but he no longer cared to what extent the welfare and happiness of the callous young man might be compromised by his prodigality.

"What on earth can this boy mean," was Docket's secret reflection, while riding leisurely, a few days after his return to the Hall, through the fine woods of Stoke, "what on earth can he mean by the sudden interest he is pretending to take in county politics? I have never heard a question from him concerning his influence or interests;—and now, one might fancy he had nothing so much at heart as to stand for the county!—I suspect one of the first acts of his majority will be to get into parliament. He will not be happy till he has made a fool of himself in some public capacity. *He* stand for the county,—*he!*—a reed shaken by the wind!—Does he suppose that the county would submit its interests to the care of a

boy without habits of business, of knowledge of men or things?—a boy who spends his days among opera dancers and buffoons,—who pretends only to be a man of pleasure, and does even *that* badly?—No!—they want an active and efficient man, Master Cressingham:—not a jackanapes who, because he scribbles halting verses at the university, fancies himself a man of genius,—or because he boasts of fanciful carriages and a French cook, conceives himself to be a man of fashion. However, I will attend to his injunctions by brushing up to the utmost the Cressingham influence. There will be an opportunity for a speech at the tenants' dinner next week, and I will place a few irons in the fire in other directions. The time may come for turning all this to account."

It was not to Athanasius Docket that Reginald was likely to confide that the motive of his ambition was envy of the growing renown of his cousin Richard. The clever Cressingham had succeeded.—The clever Cressingham had made a hit in parliament; so great a hit, that he was no longer called the "clever Cressingham," but Cressingham only.—*He* was *the* Cressingham. When

people in society talked of Reginald, it was still as the rich Cressingham for distinction sake; but the name of the other sufficed.

"Yes,—one of the most rising men of the day," they would reply to inquiries concerning the young member;—"a distant relation, I believe, of the Cressingham in Hamilton place, who is said to have cut him out of his fortune rather unhandsomely. The money came from a mutual cousin."

A further slur cast upon Reginald! Indifferent persons are satisfied to take such rumours upon hearsay; and half the world was ready to believe that Cressingham, the member, had been injuriously supplanted by the vulgar fellow who sported the showy *vis-à-vis*.

The impertinent and groundless suggestion of Gerald Langley was now verified. Reginald was *really* blackballed at two fashionable clubs.—Of a man less noted, such a circumstance would have been related without exciting much interest or surprise; but for the rich Cressingham to be mortified, was a topic of grand interest for the prattlers of the world of gossip.

To himself, the disappointment was fraught

with bitterness. — Though he carried his head higher than ever in consequence of his vexation, he would willingly have changed places with one of the popular younger brothers whom he saw courted in society for their family connections or personal charms.

"You have done too much to conciliate these ungrateful people," was Langley's exposition of the business. "Because they saw you in awe of them, they thought they had you hollow.— Pray observe that Holmeswell and Morton, in spite of their obligations, have done nothing for you in society."—

"I did not want them to do anything for me," retorted Cressingham, at once anxious and afraid to discuss the matter.——

"Oh! yes, you did; — you are not aware of it,—but you *did*.—The fact is, you ought to have waited to make your *début* in town till you were in possession of your fortune; or, if not disposed to remain in eclipse so long, you should have at least come out in the full tide of the season, when a man of your fortune, a perfect stranger, would have been swallowed alive as a *parti* by the ball-giving and match-making

women. But to throw off, as you did, before the season began, at a time when you ought not to have been in town at all, unless you were in parliament,—at a time when you should have been at Melton or Paris,—anywhere, in short, but in London, was a sad blunder,—a blunder it required immense tact to get over.—You were seen, in the first instance, in a bad set; and such people as Lady Gwenlyn and the Duchess of Penzance could not, of course, take you up after *that*."—

"What in the world do I care about such people as Lady Gwenlyn and the Duchess of Penzance?" cried Cressingham, with undisguised indignation.—"Fine ladies are my utter abhorrence.—I resolved from the first never to put myself up as a target for their impertinence."—

"In that case, you are more in the wrong than I fancied," said Langley coolly; "for had you insinuated yourself among them, you would have been safe from their attacks. It is only persons out of the pale of their society of whom they ever make a target.—You are in much greater danger of being shot at as a foe than as a friend."—

"To a man who does not dance and hates scandal," persisted Reginald, "such parties as those of Lady Gwenlyn and the Duchess are a mere nuisance."

"It is a pity you should *not* dance, however," rejoined Gerald,—"it would have got you on.—Besides, since you *do* go to balls, it would have been better to be seen at the best, instead of starring it among such people as these."

And, with a careless hand, he proceeded to throw over a stand of invitation cards, containing a variety of highly respectable names that were nothing more than highly respectable.

"I have not been to a ball since Easter," said Cressingham sturdily. "I tried the thing, and found it a bore. As to Lady Gwenlyn and the Penzance woman, so little attraction do I find in them that, only yesterday, Holmeswell offered to ask for an invitation to the Duchess's ball to-morrow night, and I declined."—

"You did perfectly right," replied Langley gravely. "It would have been disgusting to be refused. I know her list is full, and that nothing would induce her to have people presented to

her on such an occasion.—It must have been because Holmeswell knew you would decline, that he made the offer."—

"He could know no such thing, for it might have suited me to go," replied Reginald fiercely.

Gerald Langley replied by a provoking smile.

"I bet you a hundred guineas that I go to the Duchess's ball, if I think proper," retorted Cressingham.

"A poor devil like me does not bet in hundreds," was the cool rejoinder of the cool younger brother.—

"A pony then?"—

"A pound, if you will;—but of even that I am unwilling to rob you, for I *know* that the Duchess will refuse."

"We shall see!"—said Reginald, satisfied that the heavy obligations of Lord Holmeswell would insure his utmost efforts to secure so simple an object.—A total want of the tact arising from fashionable experience, caused him to rate the value of invitations to balls on too level a scale.—He did not fully appreciate the difference of importance between one duchess and another.—Having refused numberless invitations from per-

sons of the same rank, the possibility of being refused in his turn did not present itself.—

He *was* refused.—On requesting Holmeswell to press the point with the Duchess, who was a relation of the Maunderwells, he was even pertinaciously refused; and the nature of the bet caused the refusal to transpire.—The Duchess had, of course, the best of the story.—"She had not the honour of knowing Mr Cressingham, and having a very large acquaintance, did not wish to increase it."—No one blamed her.—The Duchess of Penzance was an authority in such matters. The Duchess of Penzance could do no wrong.

Had Reginald been rash enough to adventure *now* a similar application in less distinguished quarters, he would have been equally unsuccessful. The man whom the Duchess of Penzance had refused to know, *must* be a tiger.

So far, however, from renewing his attempts to make himself acceptable to the fine ladies whom he professed to hold in abhorrence, Cressingham affected to laugh off his rejection as the mere matter of a bet, protesting that he had asked for the invitation only for the pleasure of refusing it; and, with boyish levity, he set no bounds upon his

sneers at the coterie whose imperceptible barriers had thus successfully kept him at bay.—But the usual grounds for such attacks were in *his* case wanting. *He* could not descant upon the venality of match-making mammas; since even the golden key he brandished so ostentatiously, had not availed to open to him the ivory portals of the sanctuary of fashion.—

Such was the real position of the rich Cressingham towards the close of his first season in town! —So rapidly varied had been the objects of his vain ambition, that he had not yet cast up the sum total of his disappointments. That more solid portion of society over which he had affected superiority, and which enters little into the thin-skinned susceptibilities of fashionable life, *still* regarded him as the fortunate young man in the enjoyment of so fine an estate, who was lamentably squandering it away by anticipation; or descanted at their sober dinner tables upon his service of gold plate, or the costly pictures and horses, in every purchase of which he was said to be so complete a dupe; while the second-rate fashionables were never weary of relating anecdotes of his luxurious habits, and dashing excesses.

His princely establishment was still the marvel of the vulgar.—Everything that was rarest in the arts or manufactures was tendered in the first instance to the rich Cressingham.—Fruit was forced for him a month sooner than for other people; and not a picture dealer, coach maker, or jeweller wanting a victim, but was sure to cringe his way to the favour of one who felt that it was at least in his power to dazzle;—that if he could not command estimation, he might excite envy and wonder.

With the false judgment created by the influence of money on an uncultivated head and heart, instead of perceiving that mere fortune had not sufficed to insure consideration, he fancied that his failure arose rather from a deficiency of fortune; that he had not done enough; that people expected to see the man of fortune *more* profuse in his habits; and he consequently lavished thousands upon thousands, in pursuit of the roc's egg wanting to his collection,—the gorgeous charm which he fancied would bring the world to his feet.

It was not till the first check of his extravagance, by a difficulty in raising a considerable

sum of money, lost at play, which his guardian had declined advancing, that Reginald had began seriously to inquire of himself what advantage or what satisfaction he derived from his showy and disreputable modes of life. It was a rainy day. His magnificent drawing room was quite as cheerless as any other sunless abode on a rainy day. A few hours' solitude produced by the state of the weather, compelled him to reflection. He saw that after the expenditure of a sum more nearly amounting to a hundred and fifty thousand pounds than he cared to own, he had achieved nothing in London, but being bored and laughed at. With all the carriages in his coachhouse, all the horses in his stable, all the books in his library, all the finicalities in his house, he enjoyed himself no more than Gerald Langley, with his one cabriolet, one hack, and a lodging in May Fair;—nay, far less,—for Langley's proceedings were not spied upon, nor his place in society questioned, nor his conduct scoffed at by the Sunday papers.

The philosophy of a narrow heart and narrow mind, did not, of course, reach so far as the discovery that he had scattered his riches like smoke,

and nearly to as much purpose;—that he had done things to be vain of, nothing to be proud of;—that he had accomplished no great or generous action;—and that the egotism generated by excessive riches, is a false appetite, a fiendish craving, which defeats its selfish desires by an inherent incapability of gratification.

"I am only come in for a moment, my dear Cress!" cried Sir Henry Morton, putting a close to his solitary cogitations by a slap on the back, having entered the drawing-room unperceived. "It is turning out a fine afternoon. Beaconsfield's drag is at the door. We are on our way to Lord Maunderwell's for Goodwood races, and mean to coach it the first stage. I got him to stop, that I might beg you not to wait dinner for me on Friday,—for I scarcely fancy I shall be back in time."

"Goodwood races? Why couldn't you tell me you were going when you accepted my invitation?" inquired Reginald; surmising, and with truth, that he had been purposely kept in the dark, lest he should resent not having been invited to join the party.

"I thought of course, you knew it—I settled it

with Holmeswell the day we dined at the Travellers. Oh! by the way, I forgot that you were not with us."

"You are quite aware that I do not belong to the Travellers," said Cressingham, stiffly. "But if you do not wish to keep to your engagement with me on Friday, of course I shall not press it."

"I am taking down Beaconsfield to old Maunderwell's, near Goodwood," said Morton, looking somewhat awkward, "and as we have promised to remain there for the race-week, it would break up the party if——"

"If you were to adhere to your engagements with *me*, so as not to break up mine," persisted Cressingham, still more angrily.

"Nay, nay,—you totally mistake the matter!" cried Morton, trying to put a good face on his discomfiture. "The truth is, my dear Cress (and I know you are too good-natured to wish to spoil sport)—the truth is that the Maunderwells are wild to catch my friend Beaconsfield for Lady Adelaide; and they could not well have him staying at Maunderwell Court after Holmeswell and I were gone. However, I will throw over the thing

with pleasure, if you have any object in my dining with you that particular day."

Feeling himself now *really* aggrieved, Cressingham affected to be perfectly satisfied with the excuse; and hurried off his friend to the impatient set whose drag was waiting in Piccadilly, attracting the admiring notice of the throng as the neatest turn out of the season, and a credit to the taste of the young Marquis of Beaconsfield, who was driving it in the dress and with the air of that rare anomaly in fashionable nature, a sporting gentleman.

But no sooner had Morton quitted the room, than the repressed ire of his friend burst forth. Lord Beaconsfield was precisely one of the men who had fought shy of his acquaintance; and Holmeswell's sister, Lady Adelaide North, the only girl in London to whom he had felt desirous to render himself acceptable as a suitor. The Earl of Maunderwell was not a wealthy man. An alliance with the heir of Stoke Paddocks was one which he had no pretension to despise; and from the attention she received from the family, Cressingham flattered himself that his attentions were not only perceived, but courted. Albeit his habits

of life, for fashion's sake rather than from dissolute propensities, were freer than might have been supposed likely to recommend him to so sober a family as the Maunderwells, he was constantly invited to their house,—constantly welcomed as the intimate associate of Lord Holmeswell; and if he had not actually hazarded his proposals, it was chiefly reluctance to place so proud a man as the Earl in collision with a vulgar fellow like Athanasius Docket, which had determined him to defer the offer of his hand till the attainment of his majority.

But he had reason to suppose that his preference was sufficiently manifest to be protected by Lady Adelaide's brother. He had said a thousand times in Holmeswell's presence that she was the only woman in England whom a man in his senses would choose as a companion for life; and though Holmeswell usually selected the moment of such declarations to settle his cravat in the glass, or adjust his waistcoat, Cressingham found sufficient encouragement in his manner to believe himself acceptable as a brother-in-law!

And now, to be thus treacherously thrown over. A party at Lord and Lady Maunderwell's for

Goodwood races, including all the intimate friends of their son, saving the rich Cressingham, was in itself an affront; but a party made expressly by Holmeswell, to give to the Marquis of Beaconsfield an opportunity of paying his addresses to Lady Adelaide, was an "ungrateful injury," beyond the reach of patience! Holmeswell, to whom he had lent his money, his horses, his carriages, his dogs, his guns,—Holmeswell, who would not so much as lend him his countenance in return,—Holmeswell was a double-dyed traitor!—

Till now, with the irresolution common to feeble characters, he had been uncertain as to the amount of his admiration for Lady Adelaide North. —If fully alive to her merits as a well-born, well-bred girl,—admirably brought up and peculiarly qualified to preside over a noble establishment,—with the fastidiousness of a disposition, if not naturally cold, iced by the artificial chill of fashionable life, he had sometimes allowed himself to doubt whether she were pretty enough to do honour to his taste; and whether, in the Penzance and Gwenlyn coterie there might not exist metal more attractive.

But from the moment that he was compelled to regard her as the future Marchioness of Beaconsfield, and wife to the man who had not considered him good enough to dine with, the lovely mortal rose into a divinity.

He had no further hesitation in perceiving that he was desperately and irretrievably in love with Lady Adelaide. It was his passion for *her* that had been the secret cause of his recent languor and ennui. It was *her* presence that had been wanting to complete the attraction of the house wherein so much damask and ebony, and such fine pictures and sculpture, were lavished in vain. It was *her* affection that had been necessary to his happiness. It was *her* influence which, unsuspected by himself, had been gnawing at his heart; and the day of her marriage with Beaconsfield would render him a wretch for life.

The moment a man makes up his mind to admit to himself that he is in love, it is amazing what confirmation he finds in circumstances, previously irrelevant, to strengthen his passion. The preceding day, he would scarcely have driven his cab so far as the gate of Kensington Gardens for the certainty of a walk there with Lady Maun-

derwell and Lady Adelaide North. Now that he conceived her on the point of being lost to him for ever, he would willingly have yachted to Egypt for the chance of a meeting.

After a severe struggle with despondency, it occurred to him that an interview might still turn the scale in his favour. There wanted only a month to the attainment of his majority. No obstacle need prevent his offering his hand to Lady Adelaide; and from the graciousness with which she had always received the attentions of her brother's friend, he had good right to infer the possibility of her acceptance. *She* might entertain no projects upon the Marquisate of Beaconsfield, though her parents promoted the match. In fact, he owed it to her to give her an opportunity of making her election.

But how was this to be effected? To address a letter to the Earl or Countess, in the very teeth of his knowledge of their present views, would have been absurd; to address one to the young lady herself, contrary to the usages of a family so formal. A personal interview was difficult to accomplish, since it was impossible for him to

intrude into the house with a party staying in it which he felt he ought to have received an invitation to join.

Goodwood, at least, was neutral ground. There was no reason he should not go down to the races, and take the chance of an opportunity. He had declined two invitations to houses in the neighbourhood; one from Sir Giles Snaffle, a man better known on the turf than elsewhere, who had a noisy party staying with him at Bognor; — the other, from Sir Carnaby and Lady Riddlemere, whose family place was at no great distance from Lord Maunderwell's, and who, having three daughters to marry, were civil to the rich Cressingham, both on Lord Holmeswell's account and his own. To appear at the races, would be an act of ungraciousness towards all these people; and it was only by making it a lark, and going down with Gerald Langley at an early hour on the morrow, as fast as a britschka-and-four would carry them, to return at night, that the thing appeared practicable.—

Practicable it certainly was, as far as money could make it. Langley, an idle guardsman, was well content to get rid of a vacant day, towards the

close of the season, at the expense of Cressingham's company; and unaware of the motives and object of his companion, it was not *his* business to suggest that their sudden appearance, unconnected with the parties at Goodwood or in the neighbourhood, might appear to require explanation.

The weather, however, in a July previously devoted to St Swithin, proved so propitious as apparently to justify their exploit, in spite of the early hour at which it had forced them from their pillows; and had not Reginald been feverishly anxious as to the result, he might really have found pleasure in a journey smoothed and accelerated by the spell which rendered *his* journeys all but imperceptible. The two young men enjoyed each other's society as most young men enjoy each other's society on such occasions, by sleeping one half the way, and smoking the other; when, lo! on arriving a few miles from Goodwood, it suddenly occurred to Gerald Langley to exclaim against the strangeness of Cressingham's not being at Maunderwell Court.—

"Holmeswell was aware that I had refused Snaffle and the Riddlemeres," was Reginald's

embarrassed reply,—"so that it would have been an idle compliment to ask me."—

"But it would not have been an idle excuse to Sir Giles and the Riddlemeres, if you had been able to say that you were previously engaged to Lord Maunderwell," persisted Langley.—"I don't understand those Maunderwell people. They seem to me to be acting a double part towards you."—

"Or rather no part at all," replied Reginald in a tone of pique. "Their conduct with me has been as simple as mine with them.—I am one of the numerous college friends of their son, and Holmeswell one of mine. Neither of us is all-in-all to the other, and we treat each other accordingly."

"But you certainly don't treat Lady Adelaide as if she were only one of your numerous friends or acquaintances," rejoined Gerald with a smile; "and from something I saw at the Opera on Saturday night, I strongly suspect Holmeswell has been deucedly false in that quarter. I have seen him encourage your attentions to her on a thousand occasions. At that Richmond party

last week, for instance, you must recollect that it was he who pushed you into the boat with his mother and sister, when you proposed driving home with Morton.—I was surprised at his conduct at the moment, because I own it seemed to me unlikely that Lord and Lady Maunderwell would ever consent to—however, it is all plain enough now. I am convinced they were playing you off against Beaconsfield, to draw him on."—

Thrown off his guard by his usual susceptibility to taunts of this description, Reginald vehemently protested that Langley was mistaken,—that he had no views upon the hand of Lady Adelaide North, and the Maunderwells none upon that of the Marquis of Beaconsfield.

"With all my heart, since you choose to have it so," cried Gerald,—again taking out his cigar-case, as if determined to close all conversation between them for the remaining few miles. "Indeed I am heartily glad to hear you deny it; for should any one attack me on the subject at Goodwood (as will probably be the case with Lady Adelaide and yourself on the course, and

the report so prevalent), I shall answer that I have your own authority for declaring your perfect indifference."

Reginald was puzzled. He saw to what mischief such a protestation on the part of one of his intimates might expose his courtship, and tried to back out of the dilemma.—

"The less said upon such subjects the better!" said he. "Lord and Lady Maunderwell would have every right to be displeased if they found me making gratuitous declarations of indifference to their daughter."

"Since that is the case, I will be as discreet as you please," replied Langley, with a significant smile.—"But if Lady Adelaide North is to have no share in our expedition to-day, may I ask what makes you so much more on the *qui vive* about Goodwood races, this year, than you were about Epsom or Ascot?"

"Ascot perhaps inspired me with a taste for Goodwood," replied Cressingham evasively; "for I have one or two heavy bets.—In fact, I am beginning to feel a considerable interest in the turf."—

"The deuce you are!"—was Langley's re-

joinder; "I am truly sorry to hear it!" added he, a moment afterwards, with an air of hypocritical sympathy; "and I beseech you to beware, my dear Cress, how you make such an admission before Snaffle or his set, or you will be snapt up in a mouthful!—To be attempted with safety, the turf requires as steady an education as the church! You have been brought up out of the line of such things, and at present are not the least fit to be trusted among all those knowing fellows."—

In the act of retorting, Reginald was silenced by a cloud of dust; and lo! from a beautiful by-road, overshadowed with lofty elms as if leading towards the gates of some fine seat, emerged a train of carriages containing a joyous, laughing, chatting party, headed by Lady Maunderwell's barouche, in which sat the Countess and her daughter, Morton and Beaconsfield. The Marquis, placed auspiciously opposite to Lady Adelaide, was bending towards her as they passed; and a smiling blush avouched the happy intimacy already established between them.

Reginald saw at a glance, even without the malicious interpretation of Langley to guide his

observations, that Beaconsfield was a favoured, if not an accepted lover.—To press his attentions under such circumstances, could only tend to further mortification. He had clearly travelled his sixty miles in vain!

Instead, therefore, of joining the Maunderwell party, he attached himself at once to that of Sir Giles Snaffle,—affected the most eager interest in the sport of the day; and in the dead of night returned to town, stupified by he knew not exactly how many bottles of champagne, to wake the next morning with an excruciating headache, and the agreeable certainty of having paid for his footing on the turf to the amount of he knew not exactly how many thousands of pounds!—

CHAPTER IX.

Faults in the life breed errors in the brain,
And these reciprocally those again.

COWPER.

"LOOK here!" was the first exclamation of Gerald Langley, when they met in the afternoon at Crockford's, the only fashionable club into which, over a bridge of gold, Reginald had made his way. And on examining the paper held out by his officious friend, the first paragraph that met the eye of Cressingham was an announcement of his approaching marriage with Lady Adelaide North; all the usual editorial arabesque of "amiable and accomplished," and "hymeneal altar," being profusely lavished in honour of the nuptials of the Man of Fortune.

"How absurd, but how annoying!" exclaimed

Reginald, for once startled into frankness,—"doubly annoying just now, too, when—I wonder what steps I ought to take on such an occasion?"—said he, suddenly interrupting himself.

"None, I should imagine. The best way of dealing with such reports is to let them die as easily as they were born; and you will, at least, enjoy the satisfaction of laughing in your sleeve at the multitude of blockheads by whom you will be pestered with congratulations."

So far, however, of laughing, either openly or inwardly, Reginald was stung to the quick by the good wishes poured in upon him on the occasion. Everybody assured him that they had long perceived his attachment to Lady Adelaide; that they heartily wished him joy of the success of his suit; that it was a choice which did honour to his taste, and that he was about to become the happiest of men. The cruel eligibilities of the match were pointed out with circumstantial persecution. In vain did he deny the soft impeachment; he was assured that such negatives went for nothing. Everybody was resolved to be aware that he was desperately in love; and everybody enchanted that Lady Adelaide North should have

consented to reward his attachment. Thoroughly harassed and annoyed, Reginald was beginning to devise some means of terminating the erroneous impressions of his friends, when another formal paragraph took justice into its hands. The Morning Post was "empowered by authority to deny the report of an approaching marriage between Lady Adelaide North and a certain wealthy commoner!"

Now, as the "wealthy commoner" had given no "authority" for the denial, it was clear that the refutation must proceed from Lord Maunderwell's family; and though privileged to declare the truth on such an occasion, Reginald felt unreasonably sore at the promptitude with which they had flung off the imputation. He fancied that people smiled significantly when they begged his pardon for having been so premature in their felicitations; and was quite certain of the significance of their smiles when, the following week, further "authority" enabled the morning papers to announce that the marriage of "the Marquis of Beaconsfield with the Lady Adelaide North, would take place early in the month of August." *This* time, newspaper intelligence conveyed the

truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. If anything could have aggravated his irritation at such a moment, it would have been the apparently frank and friendly letter by which Lord Holmeswell announced the approaching event.

"I am sure you will sympathise in Addy's happiness," wrote his obliging and obliged friend. "Beaconsfield has long been the man of her choice; but there have been family objections, which are now happily removed. By the way, my dear Cress, as the period of your coming of age is approaching (when I suppose a general settlement of your affairs is to take place), pray do me the favour to send the mems. of the money you kindly lent me at Oxford, to my father's solicitor, who has orders from him to settle them. I could not remember the exact amount, or would have forwarded a cheque; for the governor is just now in such famous good humour at Addy's marriage, that he has agreed to book up for me. I am consequently almost as happy a dog just now as Beaconsfield, who is over head and ears in love, and appears a capital good fellow."

Though Reginald's bankers had been looking

very glum for the last ten days, and had even ventured a slight hint that they would prefer postponing further advances till the attainment of their constituent's majority should render his signature legal, gladly would he have dispensed with the repayment of the eighteen hundred pounds forwarded to him shortly afterwards by the man of business of the Earl of Maunderwell, and retained Holmeswell in a state of obligation. — He saw through the insolence of the case. — The man they had injured was to be paid off. — All friendship between the parties was at an end!—

In a worldly mind mortification is sure to beget recklessness. Reginald's irritation of soul rendered him desperate, — that is, desperately gay, noisy, and prodigal. — It was a time of year when few people remain in town but those wedded to the dissipations of the season by undomestic habits; people who adhere to the parks, the clubs, and the opera, after the better frame of society is broken up. Among these, it was easier for the rich Cressingham to obtain notice, than in the soberer congregation of the Maunderwell world; and the orgies of his house,

and wildness of his exploits, acquired a still increasing notoriety.

When the gaieties of London were at an end, he was to hurry to the Highlands, where a capital moor had been engaged for him for the season; and Lord Robert Leigh, Gerald Langley, and half a dozen of the noisy boys with whom he delighted to surround himself, had promised to meet him at Loch Maylan, and accompany him back to Stoke for partridge-shooting. In the interim, the attainment of his majority was to be celebrated. But it would be as easy to close his accounts with his guardian in September as in August; and Docket could preside over the tenants' dinner, and superintend the roasting of oxen and ringing of church bells. No other duty occurred to him which might not be performed by deputy. That on such an occasion anything was due to his mother, utterly escaped his recollection.

While Reginald Cressingham accordingly, on pretence of grouse-shooting, was inflaming his blood with whiskey, after losing his money at hazard to the friends who had consented to sacrifice their time to share his expedition to the Highlands, Athanasius was recommending himself

to the favour of the neighbourhood by his hospitality, courtesy, and consideration. The tenantry, to whose interests he had ever paid the most scrupulous attention, talked of subscribing for a piece of plate in his honour; and the cool decision of his conduct on many occasions of county emergency, so favourably contrasting with the feeble indolence of his last patron and the boyish levity of his present, caused more than one gentleman of the county to regret that his kingdom as guardian was about to be taken from him, and that they should shortly have to co-operate with the thriftless young man, whose follies they ascribed to the weak indulgence of his mother rather than to the artful encouragement of his guardian.

The infirm health of Mrs Blair was a bar to all intercourse with the neighbourhood; and the mutual position of Athanasius and his ward had consequently only been exposed to the observation of a few parties of dissipated young men, not likely to exercise much judgment on the case; who saw in the attorney the most blameless, because the most acquiescent of Mentors. Even the Drench and Chaffles tribe had been so assiduously propitiated by the neighbourly offices of

Docket, and so cruelly alienated by the insolent slights of the haughty young man to whom they had shown kindness when a neglected boy, that they were far readier to sympathise with the enormous amount of trouble and anxiety which the dashing ward had occasioned to the excellent guardian, than to surmise what amount of pecuniary advantage might have accrued to the excellent guardian from the follies of his profligate ward.

It was edifying to perceive with what submission Athanasius Docket received the officious advice mumbled into his ears by the old Vicar touching the order of the festivities about to commemorate the coming of age of their patron. It might have been supposed that the guardian was purposely proposing an impossible site for the construction of the grates that were to roast the oxen, in order to stand corrected by Dr Chaffles; and that his arrangements for doles to the poor were intentionally absurd, in order that the Vicar might originate a more appropriate scale.

Even to Drench, he was condescendingly conciliating; the only petition of the family apothe-

cary being that the rejoicings and tumults of the day should be kept as far as possible out of hearing of The Wilderness;—his poor nervous patient being now apothecaried into so deplorable a condition of body and mind, that her sole anxiety, on occasion of an event for the accomplishment of which her best days had been sacrificed, was to escape the noise of platoons and bob majors!—

With the co-operation of the other "professional advisers of the Cressingham family," Docket took care that the demonstrations usual on such occasions should far exceed even those which had commemorated the close of the law-suit; and there was twice as much shouting, and quite as great an effusion of strong beer, as if the shouters and drinkers had cared a straw whether the young squire were to be hanged on the morrow.

Of all who surveyed the festivities of the day, little Justina alone noticed that the only people who seemed to regard the 28th of August with utter unconcern, were the man to whom it assigned independence for life, and the woman whose only son it invested with the dignities of manhood. It was not for *her* to surmise that the mind of the woman

thus pensively secluded from observation, might be wandering back with regret to the time when the babe which that day bestowed upon her, was her only earthly joy; when there was less gilding upon her furniture, but more sunshine in her heart; and that one such whisper as that of the shy, gentle boy on the gaining of their lawsuit,—"Thank God, dearest mother, your troubles are over!"—would have created greater exultation in her bosom than all the congratulations of her neighbours on his imaginary engagement with the daughter of an Earl, or the discharge of cannon that announced his being at full liberty to play the fool.

For though ungifted to argue sagely on the changes wrought in the nature of her son by the hardening sunshine of prosperity, Mrs Blair was sufficiently observant to perceive how slight her hold upon his affections; that he had learned to consider her rather as one of the trees upon the estate, than as his sole remaining link of union with his kind; that he had not a thought or feeling in common with one whom it was his first duty to love and honour; — and more of her peevish valetudinarianism than the neigh-

bourhood supposed, was attributable to the silent consciousness of having a thankless child.

So limited, indeed, was now the intercourse between them, that she was indebted to Docket for information that Reginald was to be at home on the 1st of September, to open the shooting season; and almost trembled at the idea of his re-appearance at Stoke with uncontrolled freedom of action, backed by companions as reckless, if not as potential as himself.

He came at last;—and the increased hauteur of his manners, and coarseness of his pleasures, indicated that the mother's fears were not altogether groundless. Sanctioned by the encouragement of Lord Robert Leigh, Gerald Langley, and the rest of his *roué* associates, he affected to treat with his ex-guardian as with a pettifogging attorney, a money-lending usurer; and had any but the noisy, witless crew of Reginald's hangers-on witnessed the Shylock-like submission of Anastasius to the contumely of his ward, they would have perceived that there was mischief brewing under so smooth a surface.

The accounts of the wily guardian had passed triumphantly through the hands of the Master in

Chancery; and all that met the eye being sound and reasonable, he had nothing to fear. It only remained for him to obtain a general release from his ward; who, unable to controvert the evidence of his own signatures of receipt for monies levied in his behalf, and appalled by the terrible array of figures through which he was compelled to wade in the course of the two mornings in which, after hurrying up to town, he was passed, like a brief, from lawyer to lawyer, was right glad to confirm the documents prepared for him, and slink away from the disagreeable consciousness of having forestalled three years' income, and having no one but himself to blame for it !—

Disgusted as people are sure to be with the instruments who have ministered to their vices, his only agreeable anticipation on coming of age was that of breaking all further connexion with Docket. Even through the scrupulous obsequiousness of Athanasius, Reginald discerned the dislike engendered by his insolence; and so far from accusing himself as the originator of a resentment so natural, sought refuge in the triumph of flinging him off for ever.

The most vindictive monarch, premeditating the

dismission of an obnoxious minister, never more eagerly waited his opportunity than Cressingham for signifying to Athanasius that he was in no further need of his professional services. The man of fortune intended to do an ungracious thing in the most ungracious way. He meant to convey the intimation through his steward by a formal letter, to be delivered to the ex-guardian on his re-appearance at the Hall; and scarcely could he repress the avowal of his intentions when, after executing the formal deed of release upon their private accounts, Athanasius somewhat hurriedly withdrew from his presence.

No sooner had Docket left the room than the solicitors in whose hands the deeds were deposited, placed in his own an open letter, which he proceeded mechanically to peruse, as probably connected with the plagues of the day. It contained, however, the formal resignation of Athanasius as man of business to the Cressingham family!— Foreseeing his project, the attorney was beforehand with him!—

In no very pleasant temper, therefore, did Cressingham return home, where his visitors had been making merry during his absence. He felt

that he had been outwitted; and that coming of age was a less agreeable epoch in a spendthrift's life than the world is apt to esteem it. The hateful evidence of his impoverishment had passed before him, phantasmagorically, in the shape of parchments and papers without end; and now he had to confide his misdoings and miscalculations to a new man of business, by whom he should be still further plundered and tormented.

Averse to all moral exertion, he resolved at all events to defer as long as possible the nuisance of developing these perplexities. Bob Leigh and the rest of the party were to remain with him another week, to attack the remainder of his preserves; and on their departure he would return to town, and select a proper person to receive from Docket the family accounts and papers still in his custody.

Hitherto, not a care of this description had been allowed to molest him. At Stoke, everything had passed through the hands of Docket; and unless to sign receipts for the sums provided for his prodigality, he was scarcely in the habit of putting pen to paper. But now, day after day, the post brought down piles of letters from unsatisfied claimants,

and demands from money-dealers with whom the recent London season had brought him acquainted, demanding immediate attention, till he began to curse the epoch of independence which rendered him dependent on himself. A succession of importunities and appeals to his honour and sense of justice, compelled him to pay away the whole of the ready money in his banker's hands. Follies to which he had scarcely given a moment's thought in the perpetration, came back to him in the shape of goldsmiths' bills, picture-dealers' accounts, and horse-dealers' promissory notes; and few but those who have had occasion to examine the affairs of a wealthy minor, would give credit to the nature of some of these records of extravagance.

Paid, however, they must be; and ignorant of the nature of his property or the exact mode in which it was hampered, Reginald felt ashamed at the idea of commencing his intercourse with his new man of business by a confession of such gross absurdities; and when, shortly afterwards, he was apprised by his steward that the period for the payment of Mrs Blair's annual allowance had been some days past, and that for weeks to come he

should not have in his hands the means of satisfying the demand, Reginald, after exploding into imprecations infinitely terrifying to an old man accustomed to more formal habits of business, began to feel that his rupture with his factotum had been, to say the least, inopportune. Harassed by applicants, who, finding their letters unattended to, came in person to remind him that he was now of age, Reginald gave tokens of the perturbed state of his mind by scarcely concealed impatience of the noisy profligacy of his companions.

"What on earth is the matter with you, Cress?" said Gerald Langley, who was the first to take leave, on discovering Reginald's spirits begin to flag.—"Is your digestion failing? or are you fretting at not being invited to this famous *battue* at Beaconfield's?—I swear I believe you have never got over Lady Adelaide's marriage! But pluck up, my dear fellow!—One ball in Hamilton Place next season, and you will have all the girls in London at your feet. You can get some one to ask the company for you, and the pretty Marchioness to preside. She owes you *that* after throwing you over so shamefully."

Still more impertinent were the surmises of Lord Robert Leigh.

"You seem monstrously hipped, old fellow. What has set your teeth on edge? Has Cressingham's clever speech at the Liverpool dinner put your nose out of joint?—or have you been feeling your way with Langley about getting invited to Ashleigh Park for the holidays, where they have resolved not to have you?"

To admit the truth of his situation to associates so devoid of sympathy, was out of the question; and it was no small relief to Reginald when the last of the party took leave, and he was released from their galling interrogations.

His first impulse, on finding himself alone, was to go and spend the evening with his mother. It was very long since he had attempted an evening at The Wilderness; and his conscience smote him as he walked thither across the park, now cheerless with falling leaves and a November fog, towards the little domain once so dear to him, which he had of late shunned as the refuge of all that was depressing.

After the wild excesses of the last eight months,

there was something almost preternatural, something that acted on his feelings like a charm, in the aspect of his mother's quiet sitting room, nothing in which had varied by the breadth of a hair during his absence. His morning visits were always as hurried as possible; and little had he anticipated so great a need of human sympathy as now conveyed him to his mother's quiet tea-table for the solace of companionship. At that moment, he was more in want of an affectionate heart, however simple, however ignorant of the world, to be interested in his cares, than of all the wit, wisdom, or fashion of fastidious London life.

Mrs Blair, though unable to abstain from the custom of invalids, of inflicting upon him the prolix details of her sufferings, was silenced the moment she discerned in his absent looks that he had sufferings of his own. A mother's eye is not to be deceived; and the first suspicion that he was unhappy, made him her son again.

But the tenderness of her inquiries rebuked his conscience, and reduced him to silence. Conscious that it was the difficulty of doing justice to a claim of *hers* which at that moment produced his greatest perplexity, he assured her that he had

nothing on his mind,—that the loss of his friends had perhaps put him out of spirits; and he began to talk of London and its gaieties, in a tone of joyousness that might have satisfied anything but the craving of a parent's ear.

"I am sure there is something the matter, dearest Reginald," said she.—"You are looking quite ill.—I am sadly afraid the gay friends who have been staying with you have led you into excess. Do see Drench to-morrow, my dear son; I am persuaded Drench would be able to set you up again."—

"I am rather afraid *not*, mother," retorted he, with a smile, touched by a tone of anxiety to which he was so little accustomed.—

"Then I am *sure* you have something on your mind! Some attachment perhaps?—I am afraid the marriage of the young lady to whom the newspapers announced your engagement, has vexed you?"

"On the contrary, my dear mother, I consider myself fortunate to have escaped offering my hand to a girl who evidently had not a shadow of regard for me."—

"Then what can be the matter?" exclaimed

Mrs Blair.—"Ah! my dear Reginald, if, rolling in riches as you are, you still find cause for discontent, who can expect to be happy!—With such a fortune as yours—"

"Even such a fortune as mine may be impaired by such extravagance and ignorance of business as mine," said Reginald hastily.

"Impaired?—*your* fortune impaired?"—retorted Mrs Blair, with a smile. "You do not know what you are talking of!—Mr Docket has often told me that your rentroll will be little less than fifty thousand a-year!"

"My rentroll, perhaps. But the times are bad. A man is lucky who can reckon on two-thirds of his rentroll.—If, however, mine were safe in full, I have bespoken it shamefully; and money is not so easily raised as you may fancy."—

"Money *raised?*"—repeated Mrs Blair, who, among the evils she had conjectured for her son, certainly never anticipated deficiency of means —"My dearest Reginald, if you are in any want of money, for goodness' sake apply to the bankers for my half-year's allowance, which must have been paid in a fortnight ago, and which I have never touched."—

Reginald's colour rose. The generous promptitude of his mother conveyed a cruel reproof.

"But why allow yourself to be annoyed by such matters, my dear boy?" persisted Mrs Blair, unwilling, even for the assuagement of her fears, to dwell upon a topic evidently distasteful to Reginald. "Why not refer everything to Docket? —Docket is so ready in every emergency!"—

"Mr Docket has ceased to act as my agent," was Reginald's cold reply.

"The report was true then!—It was mentioned to me by Mrs Chaffles, but I could not believe it. Oh! my dear Reginald!—Docket may not be a man of polished manners, but so old a friend—so faithful a servant of the family—How *could* you dismiss him!"—

"My dear mother, he dismissed *me*. Mr Docket has grown too great a man for business."—

"Apply to him, then, for his advice as a friend."—

"I suspect he would make no answer to such an appeal. Either he took affront at some imaginary slight; or, aware of the perplexities about to beset me, threw up the tangled skein just

at the moment it was getting too involved for him."

Still, however, Mrs Blair persisted in her entreaties to him to appeal to the counsels of the only man familiar with the nature of his property and resources.

"I agree with you that the fellow is the only man likely to get me out of all these cursed scrapes," said Reginald. "In fact, I am beginning to feel that he is an inevitable evil. But I cannot commit my own dignity by courting him back."

Having succeeded in persuading Reginald, it was easy for his mother to indulge the surliness of his false pride, by extending an olive branch in his name. A letter purporting to bring back Docket to Stoke Paddocks, was instantly indited by Mrs Blair.—

But alas! the missive was unsuccessful.—Mr Docket was absent from home.—Mr Docket was gone on business into Wales.—His servants could give no certain intelligence of his return.

Mrs Blair persisted, however, in her advice to her son to refrain from intrusting his affairs to the hands of strangers. Docket could not *very* long

absent himself.—For a few days, matters might remain as they were.—

Little did she suspect to what painful importunities her dear Reginald would be exposed in the interim;—little did she imagine how thoroughly Athanasius had calculated and foreseen the consequences of his prolonged absence;—and still less was she prepared for the eager self-gratulation with which her haughty son would hail the arrival of the new travelling carriage which brought back in triumph to the Hall, the man whom, from the moment of his refusing further advances, Cressingham had sworn, in the presence of Lord Robert Leigh and Sir Henry Morton, should never enter the gates of his dwelling after the attainment of his majority !—

CHAPTER X.

"The vanities that play their part,
Uncheck'd in every worldly heart,
In the child's breast the spark began,
Grows with his growth, and glares in man."

COTTON.

A CASUIST might have found means to justify the inconsistency of young Cressingham, on the grounds that the grave gentleman who now accosted him, presented scarcely a grain of affinity with the smirking attorney on whom he had been in the habit of venting his boyish insolence. It would have been utterly impossible for Reginald to take liberties with him *now;* an air of cold defiance on the part of the abdicated potentate, kept his ungrateful ward thoroughly at bay.

Mrs Blair, indeed, in whose presence the interview took place, could not recover her surprise at the altered demeanour of the attorney suffici-

ently to explain the motives of her summons, or the embarrassments of her son; and even when she flattered herself of having made all clear, so cold and brief was his reply, that she felt under the necessity of re-commencing her explanations. Still, Athanasius knit his brows and said nothing. At length, piqued by his impracticability, Reginald took justice into his own hands, and in an off-hand way attempted to place matters in an intelligible light. But even *he* found himself embarrassed by the steadfast self-possession of the man he had offended.

"I fear it will be out of my power to be of use in this emergency. I have, as I had the honour of informing you by letter a month ago, determined to renounce all professional business," was at length his answer. "At my time of life, and a single man, I have no object in increasing the competence for which I have worked so long. I should otherwise have been happy to lend my aid in freeing you from entanglements which I had hoped your confidence in *me*, and my indulgence as a guardian, must have rendered impossible."

Reginald was provoked to find himself looking extremely foolish at this rebuke; more especially

as he had a thousand times promised himself to avail himself of the first opportunity to upbraid his unprincipled guardian with the very indulgence which had laid the foundations of his improvidence. But the pompous serenity of Athanasius imposed upon him.

"As a friend, however,—as an old and valued friend of the family,—let *me* entreat your advice and assistance for Reginald," interposed Mrs Blair, not hesitating to sacrifice her sense of dignity to the hope of conciliating one whose services were valuable to her son.

Mr Docket bowed; not gratefully, however,—scarcely even deferentially; but as if to acknowledge a tribute lawfully due. Want of head in the mother, and want of heart in the son, relieved him from sentiments of respect or regard such as might have proved an obstacle to the cold-blooded line of conduct he had traced out for himself. He was essential to them, and consequently their master; and it might be permitted even to a better man to triumph in the consciousness of superiority over those who had beset him with undeserved humiliations.

Even when he consented to overlook, as a

friend, the accounts which presented such a Dædalian mystery to the spendthrift, and to suggest such arrangements as might satisfy the more pressing of his claimants, it was with unabated dignity and coldness.

In a fit of folly, arising from irritation of mind at finding himself unable to carry all before him by a stroke of the pen, as during his minority, Reginald had quarrelled with his family banker; and the first step proposed by Docket was to visit London, and adjust this untoward difference with the respectable firm, who had resented the hauteur and ignorance of business of their boy-client.

In the course of a day or two, accordingly, he was able to forward to Reginald a credit sufficient to meet all immediate demands; and while he still declined suggesting the name of a solicitor to undertake the management of the Cressingham property, on the grounds that among Reginald's numerous friends he could be in no want of advisers, he pressed him to make an immediate choice, such as might enable him to surrender the papers in his custody into authorized hands previous to his retirement into Wales; where, in the vicinity

of his birth-place, he had purchased a small estate.

All this was a cruel mortification to Reginald. He had never surmised that Docket's services would prove beyond his reach. He had fancied that the attorney was coquetting with *him*, as *he* had coquetted with the attorney. That one whom he had recently regarded as little better than a menial should have achieved independence, while he, the rich Cressingham, was in embarrassed circumstances, appeared a mockery of their relative position!—

In the desperation of his perplexity, he now flung aside even the lion's skin of self-love, and hastened to offer to his ex-guardian terms of preposterous amount, to engage him again in his service. In vain!—The plans of Athanasius were grounded on other calculations. The position to which he aspired in the world was incompatible with any permanent connexion with a man so unstable; and though the rich Cressingham scouted the idea of a man like Athanasius Docket asserting political opinions of any kind, the new landed proprietor did not hesitate to cite, among the numerous discrepancies between

them, the secession of his quondam ward from the wisdom of his ancestors,—the hereditary toryism of Stoke Paddocks.

Again therefore, and in phrase still more dignified than before, did he reiterate his refusal. But this time, his letter contained the disagreeable intelligence that certain reversionary clauses in the will of the late Sir Giles, bequeathing his estates to public charities in the event of the death without issue of his youthful heir, would render it peculiarly difficult to raise money on the property; and that in consideration of the embarrassments already existing, which for years to come must operate a severe diminution of his income, he suggested to Reginald the propriety of reducing his London establishment, selling off his yacht, giving up his villa, and devoting himself exclusively to a country life.

"Unless I am misinformed," wrote Athanasius, "you have found your career in the fashionable world less satisfactory than you expected. Presuming, therefore, upon the privileges of my age, I would suggest that an early marriage, by securing the reversion of your property to offspring of your own, and settling you at once in

the tranquil enjoyment of home, might more permanently secure your honour and happiness than persistence in excesses which, I regret to find, have made your name somewhat notorious, and effected a serious injury to your property and prospects."

"Impertinent old puppy!"—was the first outburst of Cressingham's indignation, on receiving this lecture at the hands of the man whom his own weaknesses had elevated so strangely above his head.

"Marry and settle in the country forsooth—ay! probably as *he* is about to do on his Welsh farm!—marry, and become an example to the neighbourhood—edified by the sermons of his friend Chaffles, and fortified by the draughts of his friend Drench!—Bury myself at Stoke, in the hope that the birth of a son may render me master of my estate!—I am much obliged to him!"—

Released from pecuniary restriction, already were reviving in his heart those impulses of selfishness and mistrust, which had their origin in the predominant influence of his fate—the influence of Mammon; and never had he been so impatient

of the advice of Docket, as now that it was wise and reasonable. He almost lent an ear to the suggestion of Lord Robert Leigh, who happened to be breakfasting in Hamilton Place when the letter arrived, that he should either horsewhip or call out the man who troubled him with advice instead of assistance.

"For heaven's sake, my dear fellow," cried he, "don't submit to be preached down in this sort of way. If you want a lawyer, I have a capital fellow to recommend to you, who has settled no end of awkward affairs for *me*, and has money at command instead of sermons. Come with me to Gray's Inn, and you will find a man of the world, instead of a sneaking fellow who, after fleecing you to the skin, is the first to turn round upon you. My friend Snapper will take all manner of trouble off your hands; and it would not much surprise me if he should discover that this impertinent guardian of yours has been feathering his nest famously at your expense."

In the heat of his resentment against Athanasius, accordingly, Reginald hurried with Lord Robert to the capital man of capital who was to steer him into smooth water from the midst of

billows and breakers, and whose smiling alacrity certainly presented a most agreeable contrast to the resentful impracticability of Docket. The acquisition of such a client as the rich Cressingham, was the gaining of a prize in the lottery to a bill-discounting lawyer; and it seemed impossible to welcome him in terms too accommodating, or on knees too bended. Messrs Snapper and Co., in short, undertook everything, made large advances, and promised more; and within a week after his introduction to them, Reginald was with Bob Leigh at Newmarket, losing more money and signing more bills than even his own improvidence could contemplate without anxiety.

Young Cressingham was now fairly launched in a career which, though it might have witnessed so many wrecks, presents illusions capable of deceiving every new adventurer into a belief that there can be no danger from rocks and shoals known to all navigators, and marked for avoidance in every chart. With the vagueness of perception common to persons on whom exactitude has never been inculcated as a duty, he kept assuring himself that a man of *his* fortune could afford to exceed; that he might at times experience a want

of ready cash; but that, being still the rich Cressingham, it was unnecessary to perplex himself by entering into the petty details of his affairs, which with skilful management must speedily come round. He was not yet reduced to the cruel duty of self-denial.

He accordingly persisted in his habits of lavish expense, and kept a fair face upon the matter. As regarded the world, the great ambition of his superficial nature was to avoid being thought a bore; as regarded himself, to escape being bored. He fancied he must have neglected himself if he felt a moment out of his four-and-twenty hours hang heavy on his hands. The object of a fortune like his, was to provide such a succession of excitements as might supersede the necessity of thinking, feeling, or becoming cognizant of the commonplaces of life. The grand privilege of the rich Cressingham was to commit all the follies committed by others of his class, on a more extended scale.

Though still smarting under his losses at Newmarket, accordingly he allowed himself to be persuaded by Bob Leigh that there was no existence during the winter months elsewhere than

at Melton. He had got tired of hunting at Oxford, — but it was because it *was* hunting at Oxford. Melton was a very different thing; and with the aid of the ever ready "capital fellow in Gray's Inn," he was soon proprietor of one of the costliest hunting stables that ever astonished the annals of Leicestershire. All men of his fortune hunted; and just as, at Oxford, he had been namby-pambyed into affecting polite literature, he was now spurred on to affect sportsmanship, by those who perceived his sensitive anxiety not to fall below the level of a fashionable man of fortune.

With the exception, however, of Mrs Blair, who, in this new mania of her son found a source of cruel disquietude for her sick room, no one passed a more disagreeable winter than the rich Cressingham. He was an indifferent rider; and his prodigal habits having supplied him with horses of the highest spirit, and in an abundance which not even the abundance of his hangers on could keep in proper exercise, he was constantly exposing himself in the field; and Gerald Langley having taken care to inform him that Bob Leigh had been heard to declare him the worst

seat in Leicestershire, while Morton was known to have whispered that he rode like a tailor, Reginald thought proper to vindicate himself by attempting exploits, the evil issue of one of which laid him on his back for the last two months of the hunting season.

The friends who kindly consented to make use of his horses during his illness instead of comforting his sick room, were not, of course, slow to hint that the accident was no more than might have been expected; that Cress was just as awkward on horseback as when he was the laughing stock of Ch. Ch.; and the next number of the Sporting Magazine contained, in addition to a piquant account of the Melton disasters of the rich Cressingham, a most free and easy exhortation to him to put himself into training (if he intended to persist in hunting), under hands which might perhaps enable him to ride his own horses.

Reginald was furious. Though scarcely able to crawl about, he began agitating himself in all directions to discover the authors of these attacks,—sport to *them*, but death to *him*;—and before he could be induced to cede to the assurances of Bob Leigh and Langley, to whom

his accident had proved so providential, that to fight against this sort of bantering would be to confirm his unpopularity for life, the sporting world found out that the rich Cressingham was a touchy blockhead, who would neither give nor take, and must be badgered into better humour.

It was lucky, perhaps, for Cressingham that his long confinement to his sofa, at the behest of surgeons summoned from town at an immense cost to declare that he would be safer under the care of the medical attendants of the place, afforded to *him* the same welcome relief from the necessity of hunting six days in the week, which a hard frost affords to half the fashionable Meltonians; for, *had* he ridden again, he would probably have seen fit to vindicate himself from the imputation of bad riding, at the risk of his life.—

His days, meanwhile, passed heavily enough. His mind was out of tune for even the slight literary recreations in which he had taken refuge from himself after his illness at Oxford; and, though he had dispatched an interdiction to his mother against coming to nurse him, in terms which an ancient Roman might have thought severe, lest a maternal visit should expose him to the

ridicule of his sporting friends, before the sixth week of his confinement was at an end, it occurred to him more than once to sigh for home, and to wish that his affectionate friends were not quite so keen in the field all the morning, or quite so noisy over their claret at night.—He knew, however, that he should be equally neglected elsewhere. Bob Leigh, Morton, Holmeswell, Langley, all his London associates, were at Melton. There was nothing to be gained by a removal to Hamilton Place.

The position of his affairs was not calculated to brighten his hours of sickness. So far from being able to detect a flaw in the accounts surrendered by Docket, Snapper and Co. were forced to admit, nay, almost to admire, their professional regularity; nor was it compatible with their own position relative to their young client to indulge in diatribes upon the culpability of the guardian, who had not forcibly restrained the premature extravagance of his ward.—

Ashamed, perhaps, of falling so far short of their undertakings in this particular, they made new show of zeal by suggesting, after due examination of the preposterous claims against him,

resistance against the keeper of a Brighton hotel, where the rich Cressingham had thought it good for his health to retain apartments twelve months in the year, which he visited occasionally for a week; and, though the nature of the charges in the disputed bill was such as to excite roars of laughter in court, the skilful cross-examination of the plaintiff's attorney brought to light such gross acts of folly and extravagance on the part of the young gentleman, who now refused to pay eleven guineas for a dish of pine-apple fritters, that all the world agreed it would have been worth Reginald's while to throw away thrice the amount of the sum claimed, rather than incur for life the stigma of such an exposure.

No sooner had the press laid hold of the affair, as a fertile source of profitable abuse and witty inuendoes, than the friends previously eager in their advice to him "not to be *done* by a rascally innkeeper," whispered in all directions, that "It was a pity a man of Cress's fortune had not thrown the money into the fellow's face, and said nothing more about the matter, and a sad mistake to have allowed himself to be so shown up:—the name of

"Pine-apple fritters Cressingham' being likely to stick to him for life!"—

Unluckily, it stuck to him in a time and place where his credit as a reasonable being was more than usually important. During his confinement at Melton, one of the many sources of bitterness by which he had striven to make the solitude to which he was assigned by fashionable friendship as irksome as possible, was the newspaper reputation of the "clever Cressingham." A great political crisis was at hand; and Reginald seemed to interest himself in the parliamentary debates, chiefly for the purpose of studying, period by period, cheer by cheer, the reports of his speeches, as if bent upon discovering the secret of his cousin's eloquence. It seemed hard, indeed, that a man educated in obscurity, who had passed through college without notice, should have thus suddenly blossomed into fame.

Recalling to mind the praise lavished upon his own efforts at the spouting club by Percy and other worshippers of his literary aurora borealis, he felt satisfied that opportunity alone was wanting to place the name of another Cres-

singham in the muster roll of fame. Withdrawn for a time from the noisy orgies of his dissolute companions, he began to perceive that he had been unconsciously, if not reluctantly, drawn into the vortex; and flattered himself that because the contemptible sphere in which he had sought a level afforded him no real enjoyment, he possessed aptitude for higher things;—and determined to buy his way into parliament, where nature would do the rest.

Not even the repeated disappointments and personal thwartings which might have been expected to modify his confidence in the royal road to learning, or golden road to success,—could inspire Reginald with wisdom. —He still imagined that gold would buy golden opinions; and that the rich Cressingham need only avow the pretensions of being called the clever Cressingham to achieve a great reputation.

It was his own fault if he had failed in minor pretensions. He might have been blackballed at White's by the malice of envious younger brothers; rejected by the patronesses of Almack's, whose daughters he had not chosen to invite to dance; quizzed at the moors as a bad shot, and

at Melton as a bad seat, or vilified by the Sunday papers as a stingy fellow after the expenditure of two hundred thousand pounds; but it was only because, to achieve such trifles, he had not chosen to apply the full force of his faculties. And if, after compassing his entrance into the House, he thought proper to get up the steam and attain parliamentary distinction, he entertained little doubt that the new clever Cressingham would very shortly eclipse the old.

These ambitions, and the irritability arising from their neglect of his sick room during the hunting season, produced inevitable estrangement between Reginald and his noisy associates.—Unaccustomed to self-restraint, he allowed his disgust to become sufficiently apparent.—The state of his health forbad all possibility of a renewal in Hamilton Place of the intemperate orgies of his hunting box; and no sooner had he declared his intention of dispensing with an opera box,—giving up his team,—disposing of his villa, and renouncing divers other expensive superfluities of dandy life, than Bob Leigh began to whisper at Crockford's, that, after all, he was afraid he had been mistaken in Cress;—that Cress was not the

right good fellow he had fancied; that Cress had a knack of always thinking himself imposed upon; —that Cress would never make, or, at all events, never keep a friend;—and all this because Cress was of opinion that he had been "keeping" his friends long enough, and that it was time he should think of himself — nay, even think for others!

For, lo! the general election so long anticipated was at hand; and placards of "CRESSINGHAM, THE FRIEND OF THE PEOPLE," already clothed all the blank walls within forty miles of Stoke Paddocks!—

CHAPTER XI.

In politics pray let's be staunch,
Arm'd cap-a-pie against the French,—
Abstain from plots, and only drive at
The public welfare or our private.
For England's sacred glory try
Turks, Jews, and Jesuits to defy,
And keep our places till we die.

PRIOR.

"I AM sure I don't know any one who has a better right to represent the county than a young man of my son's property," was Mrs Blair's rejoinder to the lamentations of Mrs Chaffles, by whom the first intimation of his intentions was brought to The Wilderness.

"But, my dear ma'am—such a county as *this!*" persisted the Vicar's lady. "So very young a man to attempt a contest with our old and venerated members! In the teeth, too, of the long

established Conservative principles of the Cressingham family."

"My son has no such close relationship to his predecessors as to bind him to their political principles in opposition to his conscience,"—retorted Mrs Blair.

"*His conscience!*" murmured Justina, who had accompanied her grandmother.

"And as to Conservatism, the very name is scarcely ten years old," added Mrs Blair, resenting anything that sounded like an imputation upon her son.

"Oh! certainly, ma'am—certainly. Far be it from me to find any fault with Mr Cressingham for asserting his independence. Only, between ourselves, the Doctor is greatly distressed at foreseeing the vast sum of money about to be expended by his young patron,—and the defeat certain to ensue."

"But why certain to ensue?"—demanded Mrs Blair, in a nervous tone.

"Because Mr Cressingham has put forward addresses at variance with the interests of the county and with his own. Was not that what Mr

Drench was saying at our house this morning, grandmamma?" observed the young girl.

"Don't talk about what you don't understand, Tina," said the old lady; while Mrs Blair murmured, in a tremulous voice—"Why, certainly, if Mr Drench is of opinion that Reginald has acted rashly, I fear it is all over with him. I dare say Drench was afraid of hazarding his real opinion to *me*. He certainly seemed to insinuate yesterday that it was impossible to guess the result of the poll."

"You see, my dear ma'am," rejoined Mrs Chaffles, cheered by the growing despondency of the invalid, "both Mr Drench and the Doctor are placed in a most painful and embarrassing situation by Mr Cressingham's manifestation of opinion. Mr Cressingham has certainly a right to count to the utmost upon their support in his canvass. But just consider what a figure they will cut!—All the folks, gentle or simple, in these parts, are out and out Tories. Sir Giles Cressingham, ma'am, was a stiff Tory,—Mr Docket, ma'am, was a stiff Tory; and the poor dear Doctor has been preaching and praying for

the good cause for the last eight-and-thirty years. At all the tenants' dinners, at every meeting at Stoke, — in private and in public, ma'am,— assizes, bible-meetings, races, and what not,— wherever there was a speech to be made, it was made in favour of Church and State. And now to have to go and swallow these words will, at the Doctor's age more particularly, be exceedingly disagreeable."

"But why is grandpapa to swallow his words?" demanded Justina. "Mr Cressingham's addresses talk of nothing but civil and religious liberty all over the globe. He cannot want grandpapa to make a slave of himself because he happens to be patron of the living of which he is the incumbent."

"Nonsense, nonsense!" interrupted her grandmother.—"You don't suppose that the Doctor intends to run counter to the interests of the family to which he has been attached for eight-and-thirty years?—No, my dear!—Your grandpapa is a man of higher principles! Only he feels his situation to be a delicate one; and is, of course, impatient that Mr Cressingham should make his appearance to give him instructions

about putting out the addresses. The London solicitors did not even pay the Doctor the compliment of consulting him about the deputation that was got up to solicit Mr Cressingham to stand."—

But though the old Vicar, now nearly in his dotage, was willing to accept proprietorship of Stoke Paddocks as sufficient evidence of fitness to be the county representative, less enlightened men were less persuadable.—It may be an advantage in a ballot at a fashionable club for the aspirant to be little known, so as to excite neither envy or malice; but, in the case of a county member, it was held essential by its leading gentlemen that something more should be apparent in their future representative than the extent of his estates. A certain number of men of liberal opinions, indeed, impatient of the subjection in which the county had long been held, voted for Reginald rather as a notification of their own opposition than with any desire for his success; and, in the sequel, all that money could effect was attempted in vain, in order to bring him within even respectable distance of the men he was desirous of unseating.

Even among the people, a saucy cry arose of

"Who *is* Cressingham, of Stoke Paddocks?" They all knew Stoke Paddocks—they none of them knew Cressingham; nay, they none of them wanted to know him. He was a man who drew his income from the county, and spent it in London. He was a man whose name was unconnected with county charities or county improvements. He had done nothing for them—he probably *would* do nothing. He was not even born among them. He was not a true Cressingham. He was a changeling,—an alien,—a nobody.—

As the polling proceeded, and the money scattered by Messrs Snapper and Co. as lavishly as if it had not cost fifteen per cent. in the raising, excited momentary uneasiness in his opponents, other civilities besides rotten eggs and dead cats were flung in the face of the indignant Reginald.

"Who ate the pine-apple fritters and then refused to pay for them?—CRESSINGHAM the fubble!" was paraded on sundry placards before his flashing eyes.

"Who pays his French cook the maintenance of sixteen poor families?"—was another of the queries addressed to him; and by degrees a thou-

sand anecdotes of his dissolute and prodigal career evoked the hooting and execrations of the fickle throng.

But this was not the worst. Though deeply mortified at finding himself indifferently supported by the county gentlemen of liberal opinions,—though enraged at being called to account for his pleasures and pursuits, the thing that touched him most was the absence of a considerable number of his more respectable tenants from the mounted procession got up in his honour. *They* chose to be steadfast in their opinions. *They* had no clever cousin in the House, on the Tory interest, to pique them into opposition. The honourable member for Wilsbury was nothing to *them;* and to the utter mortification of the poor old Vicar, a considerable number declined giving their votes to their landlord. A few, from motives of respect, abstained from voting at all; but it was observed that all those who had subscribed for the piece of plate for Athanasius Docket, which had given such offence to his ward, presumed to record their votes against "CRESSINGHAM the friend of the people," albeit proprietor of Stoke Paddocks.

It was a stormy contest. The supporters retained by the emissaries of Messrs Snapper and Co., were far short of the most respectable condition; and an affray that signalized the course of the second day's poll ended in a loss of life, which added new blackness to the evil renown of the junior candidate.

The young gentleman "who ate the pine-apple fritters and then refused to pay for them," was made accountable for all; nay, even the liberal party affected to consider that young Cressingham had injured their cause by making *his* unpopularity and incompetency pass for the weakness of their party.—Deeply mortified by the revival of the pine-apple fritters affair, he had made an indifferent speech, and was felt to have broken down on the hustings; and when, at the close of the contest, he became aware that he had expended six thousand pounds for the simple pleasure of being pelted, vilified, and pronounced incompetent by all sides of the question, he had, indeed, some cause to wish that his first flight in public life had been of a less aspiring nature.

Respectability was the word which had been most advantageously arrayed against him. The

respectability of the old members, the respectability of the conservative cause, the respectabilty of his predecessors at Stoke Paddocks, the respectability even of the Tory guardian who had retired in disgust from the management of his affairs, were cited in black, white, and grey, in contradistinction to all that *he* had ever done at Oxford, Melton, London, or left *un*done at Stoke Paddocks. And all this in presence of the Duke of Granton and Lord Ashleigh, who had proposed one of the sitting members; to say nothing of the Marquis of Beaconsfield, who was nephew to the other;—"Earl Percy saw his fall."

In town, the news of his defeat excited no surprise. The Reform Club had not judged its support necessary to the rich Cressingham, who pretended to stand forth as champion of their cause; and at Crockford's and elsewhere, where politics excite about the same interest as any other game at hazard, scarcely a man had been found to back "poor Cress" with a bet. His young contemporaries had long decided that in all his undertakings "Cress would put his foot into it."

One of the unkindest cuts of all hazarded

against him on the hustings was, that in spite of the extent of his rent-roll, the rich Cressingham was in difficulties such as rendered a seat in parliament peculiarly desirable; nor was his resentment of the imputation diminished when he had grounds to surmise that intelligence of the derangement of his affairs had been circulated by the personal friends of his ex-guardian. That Docket should consider it worth while to cabal for the political interests of a county from which he had retired for ever, and with such flying colours, appeared, indeed, scarcely probable; and though Messrs Snapper and Co., by whom the chain of evidence was traced link by link, protested that the assistance afforded by the extensive personal influence of Athanasius to the conservative cause, was a mere repayment of the sterling aid of the Carltonians, which had caused him, — *him*, the attorney,—*him*, the rebuffed of the rich Cressingham,—to be returned by the worthy and independent electors of Llanstephen, the borough immediately adjoining the seat in Wales which he had modestly termed a farm, Reginald could scarcely believe in so deeply laid a scheme of political intrigue.

The result, at least, was indisputable. Athanasius Docket was returned to Parliament, and Reginald signally defeated.—Athanasius was now his superior.—Athanasius was in a position to achieve the laurels by which he had hoped to outtriumph the honourable member for Wilsbury !—

Under this new mortification, to whom was he to turn for sympathy ?—Messrs Snapper and Co., who had earnestly dissuaded him from a contest, to provide the funds for which they had been forced to ruinous extremities, now shook their heads despairingly, if not rebukingly; while poor old Chaffles found himself too bitterly upbraided with his apostasy by his clerical brethren and Tory neighbours, to find the election a pleasant topic for discussion. Nay, he almost dreaded the idea of entering his pulpit, lest peradventure the grim visage of his patron, Sir Giles, should thrust itself forth from the family vault, to revile him for desertion of the sacred banner.

Reginald was consequently alone in his sullenness. On proceeding from Stoke Paddocks to the election, so sanguine were his expectations of triumph, so earnest his reliance on the potency of the golden charm, upon which, from his youth

upwards, he had been taught to rely, that he had all but bespoken festivities to signalise his return to Parliament; and it struck him, as his travelling carriage re-entered the park, that he discerned traces of the recent removal of a wooden framework purporting to form the foundation of a triumphal arch; and though the head gardener protested that certain stupendous faggots of laurels which he found tied up in the shrubberies, had been prepared to grace the carriages conveying voters to the poll, Reginald had only too shrewd a guess at their real destination.

It was summer time. A glorious sunset was brightening the scene, over which the disappointed man cast his eyes in disgust. While waiting for the dinner bell, instead of proceeding to The Wilderness to visit his mother, according to his wont when he had nothing else to do, by some inexplicable force of sympathy he betook himself to the shade of the beech-tree under which it was the custom aforetime of Sir Giles Cressingham to sit and muse, when equally out of sorts with the world; and, as if influenced by some local spell, his moody thoughts gradually concentrated themselves into a

most Cressinghamian thirst for revenge. Baffled in his dearest ambition, his ears still tingling, and his heart still smarting, under the buffets and insults he had endured, the man of fortune was not long in finding objects whereon to exhaust his vengeance. The following day, notices of ejectment were served by his steward upon the refractory tenants who had withheld their support from their landlord; and the following week, the County Chronicle, supported by the money and influence of the Duke of Granton and the Earl of Ashleigh, contained a bitter article upon the tyranny of the self-styled Liberal candidate, which the Conservative press judged worthy of being transferred to the London papers.

A contest in which the interests of the people had scarcely the shadow of a share,—a contest originating, on one side, in love of notoriety, and, on the other, in love of place,—was now made the groundwork of a series of splendid bursts of newspaper eloquence; in the course of which the word FREEDOM, repeated nine hundred and ninety-nine times, produced the necessity for increasing the printer's supply of upper-case F's, and the burning in effigy of the rich Cressingham, or, as he was

now termed, the tyrant of Stoke Paddocks, in his county town, and divers villages and hamlets attached to the Granton interest, and consequently peculiarly conservative ;—which, had *they* presumed to vote against the Duke of Granton's member, would have undergone precisely the same sentence as the recalcitrants of Stoke.

Meanwhile, finding himself braved and threatened on his own territories, Reginald renounced his intention of quitting home for a time, and stood his ground manfully at the Hall for the cultivation of his disgusts ! There was no one whom, under circumstances so disagreeable, he could invite to bear him company; and, with the exception of unacceptable letters by the post, no change or incident enlivened his solitary days. It was a desolate season for a man who discerns no charm in the aspect of nature. There was no shooting,—no hunting,—and the rich man had neither simplicity nor philosophy to qualify him for a brother of the angle. The country was consequently detestable. The woods were green,—the fields glorious,—the gardens bright with flowers. Harmonious sounds and sights abounded on every side; —but there was a deficiency of all which, to per-

sons wedded to the artificialities of society, constitutes the charm of country life. There was too much sunshine of a morning,—too much daylight of an evening; and Cressingham consequently found his beautiful place utterly insupportable.—Nearly ten years had elapsed since, on coming into possession, the Hall was placed in complete order; and, compared with the luxuriousness of his over-furnished town mansion, it now seemed dingy and old-fashioned. He was weary of everything around him. Unattached to the place by early associations, all became a blank when compelled to trust for enjoyment to its resources.

Moreover, there is something that weighs like lead upon the spirits in the routine of a noble establishment, when the proprietors know that though its splendours proceed as if by mechanism, the master spring is every moment in hazard of breaking. The same number of servants in the household,—the same quantity of plate on the table,—the same banquet,—the same illumination;—yet ruin silently and invisibly hovering over all!

The tyrant of Stoke Paddocks began to fancy that he discerned significant smiles upon the faces of his attendants;—that they peered into the con-

tents of his disagreeable letters,—that they perused the newspapers which vilified his character; that they were laughing in the servants' hall and steward's room over the caricatures of Pine Apple Fritters Cressingham and the strictures of the press. In vain did he betake himself to a dumb-waiter to get rid of their attendance. He could not ring the bell without feeling that they had the advantage over him; and was forced to confess that if no man can be a hero to his *valet-de-chambre*, there is no difficulty in being a coward.

Mrs Blair, when he sauntered occasionally into her close room, to find fault with the atmosphere, and wonder at the patience of little Justina, who devoted a portion of every day to comfort and read to the invalid to whom she was indebted for many a serious act of kindness, noticed with regret that his countenance was beginning to be worn with the premature cares of life. But she had not courage to attempt to obtain his confidence. It was only her young companion who ventured openly to attack him.

"How wrong you are to come and make your mother anxious by your long face, Mr Cressing-

ham!" said the fearless girl one day, when he overtook her in the park, on her way to visit The Wilderness.—"In her lonely room Mrs Blair has nothing to do, after you are gone, but suggest causes for your being so out of humour. She fancies you crossed in love;—she fancies you ill—unhappy—a thousand things; instead of simply perceiving that you are disappointed at not finding yourself so great a man as you expected."

"I thank you!" replied Reginald, in a bitter tone;—"I sincerely thank you."

"Yes, *do* thank me,—you are quite right to thank me,—for I am the only person who dare tell you a little wholesome truth. If other people had given you as much cause to thank them for plain speaking, you would not be moping alone here at Stoke, accomplishing no good purpose, boring every one as much as you are bored yourself."

"So far from being bored,—" Reginald was beginning,—

"Do not deny it!" interrupted his little friend. "You do not derive one particle of pleasure from the place which strangers cannot pass on the road without admiration. When we were children here, you were as fond of it as I was. As its

master, you see in the estate only a place where timber may be cut down to defray your London expenses. What has become of Annesley hanger, where I used to find the first violets every spring? —Gone!—What has become of the woodlands which used to clothe yonder naked hill, above Upham? Upon my word, I do not wonder at your disliking a spot so fraught with disagreeable reproaches!"—

"I dislike a place where there is no society,—no neighbourhood," said Reginald, nettled by her presumption. "Who is there at Stoke, pray, with whom a gentleman can associate?"

"With your fortune, you should secure gentlemanly associates in your own house. Where are your friends?—Where are even your companions?—such companions as they *were*—when you *did* think proper to fill the old Hall with company!"

"What temptation could I offer to people of the world to come and stay with me? Not a creature within ten miles round whom I could invite to meet them!"

"There is the Duke of Granton's family at Haxington, and Lord Beaconsfield only a few

miles further, who fill *their* houses from a much greater distance," replied Justina, coolly. "As to the immediate neighbourhood, if it boast of no *very* fine people to do you honour, you have done nothing to improve its sociability;—for our little circle—a circle that satisfied *us*—is broken up by the discords of the late contest, which has done nothing but spend your money, make *you* ridiculous, and my poor old grandfather—but of *that* I must not allow myself to speak."

"You seem to allow yourself to speak of most things with very little ceremony, Justina," said Reginald, less angrily than might have been expected.

"To *you*,—because you will never be more to *me* than when we were playmates. Had you grown up into the great man we all expected, perhaps I might have learnt to forget I had known you as a good-natured boy. As it is, I sincerely pity you, Mr Cressingham; for I look upon a man like you, blest with the power of doing so much good in the world and doing none, even to yourself, to be as great a criminal as many who are on the treadmill."

This boldness on the part of one whom he had

dearly loved as a child, but whom his worldly eye now regarded only as the humble companion of his mother,—whose business it was to wind worsted, ring for coals, and hold her tongue,—effected nothing for Reginald but to keep him away from The Wilderness. Conscious of the truth of Justina's accusation that he never made the smallest sacrifice to his mother's happiness or comfort, he amended the matter by absenting himself altogether.

The truant gained nothing in peace of mind, however, by his removal to town. Though the expedients of his men of expedience had arranged such terms with his creditors as relieved him from immediate anxiety, his mind was not quite so secure as his person. The evil day of general settlement, though deferred, could not be deferred for ever; and between the impertinent taunt of little Justina, — "if you want companionship at Stoke, why not look out for a wife?"—and the grave hint of Snapper— "if you want fifty thousand pounds, why not look out for an heiress?"— he felt at times almost disposed to exchange the noble jointure conveyed by the Stoke Paddocks

title-deeds, for a hundred thousand pounds, or so, in the way of dowry.

Heiresses are seldom wanting in money-making London, more particularly in those secondary circles with which he had been scoffed by Gerald Langley for making himself familiar; and he remembered having presented his friend, Lord Robert, with malice prepense, to the only daughter of a rich brewer, who was said to be eager to connect his overgrown inheritance with the empty title of ladyship. She was an ugly girl, if he recollected rightly—but what then?—In the choice of an heiress, people must not be too fastidious.—Provided the gilding be thick enough, it will cover any amount of defect or infirmity, personal or ancestral. The young lady in question, however, was what is called "not so *very* ill-looking for an heiress."—There was nothing absolutely loathsome in her features — nothing positively repellent in her figure; and Reginald, more at his ease in the circles of Portland Place than in that of the Duchess of Penzance, did not find the courtship to which shortly afterwards he addressed himself, half so irksome as Lord Robert Leigh,

who, by seeming to plead privilege of peerage to "come, see, and conquer," had incurred as rapid a defeat.

Had the fashionable season been in progress, Reginald might, perhaps, have experienced more reluctance. But the great world was in its country houses; the *roué* world in its hunting boxes; and London given up to the sobriety of family coaches and parties to the play.—Not a coronet was astir to distract the vain mind of the spendthrift from its purpose; and day after day did he submit with decreasing disgust to the operation of morning visits to the work-table of Miss Florence Worts.

That a young man like the rich Cressingham, handsome in his person, choice in his dress, familiar with the light literature of the day, and pleasant enough in his manners when he felt at ease, should prove a welcome visitor, was only natural. Of the numerous pretendants, past and present, to the hand of the heiress, Reginald was certainly the most distinguished; nor was he slow to remark that his arrival was always greeted with a smile, and that significant looks were exchanged as he entered the room between the fair Florence

and a certain Miss Pettigrew, ex-governess and toady regnant, who officiated as her chaperon. The influence of the favour he thus enjoyed was remarkable; and the guest, so awkward and silent at Maunderwell House, became graceful and eloquent in Portland Place.

He could not help feeling, however, that Florence was somewhat relentless in her inflictions of vulgar uncles and cousins upon his acquaintance. He had found himself compelled to acknowledge, within hail of Crockford's windows, the bow of a Mr Bartholomew Worts, a wholesale druggist in Lothbury; and to endure the hand-kissing of a blue coachful of Misses Worts, of Bedford Square, who, on more than one occasion, fairly drove him out of the Park.

But such sacrifices were not to be put in competition with a hundred thousand pounds in hand, and three hundred thousand in the bush. The free use of money had taught him the value of money; and he accordingly redoubled in attentions, even while the Christmas dinner parties of the Worts family were monopolizing whole cartloads of turkeys and chines. He was not apprehensive, on *this* occasion, of premature disclosures in the

Morning Post. Burrowed in the hyperborean circles of Portland Place, he defied even the most acute terriers of the fashionable world.

Time drew on, and the well applied spur and thong of his knowing friend in Gray's Inn, at length brought Reginald to the proposing post. By degrees, he had become personally desirous of the match. With very little tutoring, and the aid of the Cressingham diamonds, he fancied that Florence would preside with honour over his establishment in Hamilton Place. Clever and lively, her conversation amused him; and he began to fancy that the following winter at Stoke Paddocks would pass far more agreeably than the present one in Hamilton Place.

For, with the exception of the moments devoted to courtship, there was very little to reconcile him to the four hours of daylight in the twenty-four, of a London winter. The new parliament was assembled. The honourable member for Llanstephen was scudding about Whitehall in a cabriolet of unimpeachable propriety, looking grave, spruce, and assiduous, as became a new member; while the morning papers once more enlightened their great letters with extracts from

the luminous speeches of the honourable member for Wilsbury.

"I wish you would bring your cousin here some morning, Mr Cressingham," said Florence one day, when her fashionable suitor, with flushing cheek and flashing eye, was actually awaiting an opportunity for the proposal he had so long meditated.

"I regret that you should have hit upon one of the only requests with which it is not in my power to comply," observed Reginald, his countenance overclouded in a moment.

"And why not?" persisted Florence; and without waiting for an answer, she burst forth into a violent panegyric on the member for Wilsbury, to which the ex-governess chaunted forth a second, strictly in tune.—"My father is a devoted admirer of your cousin's talents and principles," said she. "My father swears by Mr Cressingham, does he not, Miss Pettigrew? So does my uncle Bartholomew; so do all our city connexions. Such eloquence,—such decision,—such consistency in all his speeches!—We always read them aloud, and sometimes more than once,—do we not, Miss Pettigrew?"

The ex-governess was smilingly confirmative.

"Papa considers him the leading man of the day, does he not, Miss Pettigrew? and my uncle Bartholomew has betted a hundred guineas with my uncle John, that if ever the Tories come in, he will have a seat in the cabinet!"

While Florence was making her usual appeal to Miss Pettigrew, Reginald imperceptibly shrugged his shoulders.

"I trust, therefore, that you will not deny us so great a pleasure as your cousin's acquaintance," added his intended bride. "I assure you he will be welcomed here on bended knees. Will he——"

"Not upon *my* introduction, certainly," hastily interrupted Reginald; "for I myself have not the honour of his acquaintance."—

"Not acquainted with your own cousin?" exclaimed Miss Worts,—warm with all the humanities of kith and kinship with the families of uncle Bartholomew and uncle John;—"how very extraordinary!—Is it not, Miss Pettigrew?"

"My mother was extremely ill-used by her brother, the father of Mr Cressingham of Manny Park," replied Reginald, gravely; "a coldness

ensued; nor have I any object in seeking a reconciliation."—

"How very provoking!" exclaimed Florence.—"Is it not, Miss Pettigrew?"

"Very provoking, my dear."

"To own the truth," said she, again turning to Reginald, "when I was introduced to you last year at the Caledonian Ball, we thought you were the clever Cressingham—did we not, Miss Pettigrew?—and even after finding out my mistake, I always flattered myself that, *through* you, we might still come to know him."

"I am sorry you should have been disappointed," observed Reginald drily, not a little piqued; adding, in a tenderer voice—"I, at least, have found in you all that I anticipated at our first meeting; that is," he continued, perceiving that Miss Pettigrew had betaken herself into the other room in search of Burke's 'Landed Gentry,' to look out for Cressingham of Manny Park, "all that can promise happiness in domestic life to the man whom you favour with your choice."

"I am sure I hope my virtues may keep their word," retorted Florence, with a saucier laugh

than Reginald thought altogether becoming so critical a moment.

"May I be permitted to add 'amen' to your wish?"—demanded he, drawing a *little* closer towards the work-table.

"Certainly, if you have any interest in the affair," replied Florence, still smiling, but without casting down her eyes, or blushing, as he expected.

"*Any* interest?" reiterated Reginald, his breath coming short, and his countenance assuming a still more earnest expression, when he saw, through the folding doors, that Miss Pettigrew was busy with vol. I, of Burke, unaware that letter C is included in vol. II. "*Any* interest?—When the hopes dearest to my heart are——"

"My dear Mr Cressingham!—recollect yourself!—What *are* you saying?" cried Florence, still perfectly self-possessed.

"I am saying what I trust my conduct for the last two months has fully prepared you to hear," replied he, really breathless with emotion, "that if the offer of my hand and heart——"

"You cannot be serious!" again ruthlessly interrupted the young lady.—"You cannot intend

to propose to *me?*—you surely are aware that I am engaged."

"*Engaged!*" cried Reginald, sinking into a chair.

"To my father's partner, Mr Jeremiah Jones, whom we are daily expecting home from his estates in Jamaica."

"I have certainly heard you allude to the arrival of a Mr Jones," faltered Reginald; "but after all the encouragement you have given me, how was I to conjecture——"

"Encouragement?" repeated Florence, scarcely repressing a smile. "Have I not admitted to you our ulterior object in making your acquaintance?"

"In *making* it, perhaps. But when you saw my growing attachment—when you became aware that it was my intention to offer you my hand——"

"How was I to surmise anything of the kind? I know that I am plain,—that I have no attractions of family or person. Your friend, Lord Robert Leigh, proposed to me, I admit; but, as he made no secret among his friends, only as a more agreeable alternative than the Bench. From you, however,—from the rich Mr Cressing-

ham,—from Mr Pine-apple Fritters Cressingham, I thought I could not be exposed to a similar insult. *You* could not be blinded to the frightfulness of the ugly heiress by the derangement of your affairs. With *you* I thought myself safe; and consequently assumed the ease and frankness of a friend."

Involuntarily Reginald started at this allusion to the interested nature of his views.

"I am quite aware of my position," added Florence, more sternly;—"I am a brewer's daughter,—a sallow, ill-featured girl, from whose appearance, when announced among strangers, people turn away with indifference or dislike. The man I am to marry has been accustomed from childhood to all this; and those who, not thus familiarized, affect blindness, can only be actuated by motives which expose them to my utmost contempt. Is it not so, Miss Pettigrew?"

"Certainly, my dear!" responded the governess, who was now poring over vol. II in search of 'Cressingham of Manny Park,' right opposite to Cressingham of Stoke Paddocks;—who, perceiving that he had been played upon, to divert the winter dulness of a house in Portland Place,

by a young lady capable of becoming a Mrs Jeremiah Jones, and whose betrothed was visiting his plantations in Jamaica, made so hasty and angry an exit, as scarcely allowed time for Miss Pettigrew to curtsey him out, and ring the bell on his departure.

Three days before, Reginald had instructed his capital friend in Gray's Inn to prepare his rent-roll for being laid before his future father-in-law, the wealthy Worts, of Liquorpond Street and Portland Place. Three days afterwards, he wrote from Paris, to require such a credit on Rothschild as would enable him to make an extended tour on the continent. Snapper was far more taken by surprise by this proposal than Florence by hers. But it was too late to remonstrate. His victim was for the present safe out of his clutches.

CHAPTER XII.

Now there is nothing gives a man such spirits,
Leavening his blood, as cayenne doth a curry,
As going at full speed—no matter where its
Direction be, so 'tis but in a hurry.

BYRON.

Poor Reginald made but a single rush from London to Paris. On quitting Portland Place, he had ordered his superfine valet to prepare for a journey, and for remaining behind; and started at once in the steam-packet, without carriage or attendants.

All his object was to get away,—no matter how, no matter whither. He seemed to fancy it written in his face that the rich Cressingham had wanted to sell himself to an heiress,—had been refused in favour of a Mr Jeremiah Jones,—had been made mockery for the Philistines by the daughter of Worts the brewer! To quit the country was the

only means his fancy suggested of wiping off so vile a stain. He could not go too soon, or too far, or with too little regard to his own comfort. For once, he would rough it, like other men who were not men of fortune.

Long before he reached Paris, however, the self-conceit, so long and dearly cherished, had received a thousand shocks that made him doubtful of the discretion of his project. It was not his sense of nicety that was offended—it was his self-conceit. Accustomed, wherever he went, to have his consequence bruited by the vulgar boasting of his servants, hitherto he had flattered himself that the deference paid to the long purse of the rich Cressingham, was tendered to his personal distinctions; and could scarcely brook the familiarity which slapped on the back and cross-questioned the young traveller who spoke such villainous French. The shabby old calêche offered to him at Calais as an appropriate travelling carriage, appeared, to eyes accustomed to the equipages of Adams and Houlditch, a positive insult; and when thrust, as a solitary traveller of little consequence, into the worst room of the inn, and advised to dine at the *table d'hôte*, as more

convenient to the waiter, his wrath exploded. The postillions greeted him with the dogged familiarity of all French subordinates paid by the tariff; while the beggars to whom he scattered his coin saluted him with a grin as "Monsieur Goddam!" The ugliness of the country, the ugliness of the people, and, in spite of all this, his own utter insignificance among them, disgusted him with his journey in the very outset.

Even in Paris, matters were scarcely more auspicious. The bankers refused to cash the bills of a stranger; and, till his letters of credit arrived, he was obliged to content himself with the moderate sum he had brought away in his pocket, and abstain from the immoderate pomps and vanities of a fine gentleman.—People consequently treated him as they would have treated Gerald Langley, or any other good-looking younger brother of tolerable address.—Nobody stood aside for him,—nobody waited till he was served,—nobody gave up their seat at the play or place in the *restaurant*, because it was coveted by the rich Cressingham;—and whereas, in revolutionized France, civility has become an obsolete weakness, he was more hustled, pushed, shoved, trod

upon, and sworn at, during his first week in Paris, than in the course of all the years that had elapsed since he was a fag at Eton.

So much the better for him! These petty grievances effaced the trace of deeper evils. In a month's time he had almost forgotten there was a street in London called Portland Place, or that he had a cousin and a cast-off attorney seated in parliament.

With all his dissatisfaction, however, at the cavalier habits of the citizens, he was enchanted with the city. The buoyancy of the atmosphere, the hilarity of the population, the brightness of the shops, the sprightliness of the women, the variety of public amusements, afforded a welcome relief after the unspeakable dulness of Stoke, and the oppressive formalities of London.—But, above all, he was unpursued there by a painful notoriety. If nobody performed Ko Too to him, nobody knew that he had been blackballed at White's, rejected at Almack's, defeated in a county election, refused by an heiress, caricatured as Pine Apple Fritters Cressingham, and served as minced meat, one day in seven, to the curious in newspaper scandal.

Comforted by finding himself regarded with perfect indifference, after having fancied himself a mark for the jests of all around him, he became almost as light of heart as if he had not been the rich Cressingham. He was compelled indeed to exert his faculties, intellectual and physical, to place himself on a par with other people; but, rendered at his ease by the independence of his isolation, exertion became less irksome. By the arrival of the credit on Rothschild, which amounted only to a third of the sum he had demanded, he had got into the habit of being civil, and of not expecting to find himself an object of deference to all the world.

The further he went, the rougher and the more efficacious his schooling. After spending the remainder of the spring in Paris, brightened in spirits and health by the excitement of its popular diversions, he proceeded to the Rhine;—and while visiting the baths of the Taunus, and mingling with the throng of princes and swindlers at Baden Baden, — frequenting *table d'hotes* and public rooms,—and adding a smattering of bad German to his indifferent French, he was gradually sinking by cubits in his self-created stature.

Reginald could scarcely forbear smiling as he recalled to mind how, at Oxford, after perusing the sparkling pages of 'Vivian Grey,' he had dreamed of just such a rough-and-ready tour, and regarded it as a pleasure denied to a man of *his* consideration;—boyishly imagining it as impossible for the rich Cressingham to preserve his incognito as for the Duke of Wellington. Instead of which, he now readily perceived that it would have been far more difficult to persuade the simple Rhinelanders that a plain Mr Cressingham —not ennobled—not a place-holder—not a *decoré*—not a chamberlain to any sovereign under the sun—could be entitled to dip in the dish with the smallest Baron of the empire, or least whiskered of the Russian generals frequenting their watering places.

The lesson was worth learning. It was something to have become aware that, in the estimation of a few billions or trillions of the continental population, he stood little higher than an Elbeuf clothier, or, at best, some country gentleman of Alsace or Lorraine. From the wandering hordes of English travellers, meanwhile, he scrupulously kept aloof. He hated their supercilious faces,—he hated their listless habits,—he

hated their notion that nothing good enough to eat, drink, or visit, is to be met with out of England.

While he was thus storing his mind with that best of wisdom called self-knowledge, the usual consequences ensued at home from his abrupt departure for the continent. The tailors, of whom he no longer ordered two coats and a dozen waistcoats per month,—the coach-makers, who had no longer thirty pounds' worth of repairs to furnish to his various carriages,—the silversmiths, where he had ceased to exhaust his invention on rainy days by projecting fanciful soup-tureens,—all the army of Bond street martyrs, in short, in whose books the name of the rich Cressingham headed page after page, and who were content that it should do so while there was a prospect of its heading pages and pages to come, began to ask angry questions of his man of business, and cross-question the servants in Hamilton Place; and so far from being satisfied, as heretofore, with the grandiloquent answer—"Good God, sir!—you surely cannot entertain any uneasiness concerning the solvency of a man of Mr Cressingham's fortune?"—ventured to reply, that a gentleman of Mr Cressingham's fortune quitting

England at ten minutes' notice, *tête-à-tête* with his portmanteau, had very much the air of a gentleman who had met with *mis*fortune.

Suspicions, like bats, flit about with wondrous activity in the dusk. A cloud once overshadowing the destinies of the absentee, it was easy to set in movement the most injurious reports. The waiters at the clubs and coffee-houses, to whom he had been in the habit of flinging five-pound notes, whispered far and near the imputations cast upon the prodigal; and with the speed usual in such matters, scandals which, like sorrows, "come not single spies, but in battalions," begat further falsehoods with monstrous haste of propagation.

"So poor Cress is regularly done up at last!" observed Sir Harry Morton to Gerald Langley, as they were smoking together on the steps at Crockford's, one fine night in May.

"At *last*?—at *first* you mean!—I sometimes fancy he was born ruined, as children are sometimes *still* born. Never was there a fellow who bungled away his money so confoundedly!—What did he ever get for it,—except, indeed, being laughed at?"—

"*That*," interrupted Lord Robert Leigh, who

was standing near them, "was because he never was a really good fellow. There was nothing warm or cordial in Cress. He couldn't drink,—he couldn't play,—he couldn't ride,—he couldn't dress,—he couldn't do anything that became the position he wanted to shine in. Men hated him because he was a prig;—women because, relying on his fortune, he took no pains to be agreeable."

"How *was* a man to be agreeable who was never at his ease, even in his own house?" cried Langley. "Sometimes, when Cress wanted to do grand at the head of his own table, and was giving himself airs, by a single word I swear I have made him look as if he were sitting upon thorns!"—

"That was remarkably kind of you, my dear fellow," coolly observed Morton, taking his cigar from his mouth.

"Who could help it?—When did Cressingham spare any one it was in his power to show up?—"

"I never imagined his powers of sarcasm to be very alarming," retorted Morton. "At least he was good-natured."

"There are other modes of showing up besides quizzing. He knew, for instance, that I pique

myself on my billiards,—that I am considered second best player in the Guards.—Well, he never got me down to that stupid place of his—(where, by the way, the table is a showy affair, but detestable!)—without matching me against Vardyne, who happens to be the only man able to give me a point or two. It was pure spite of Cress,—nothing but spite. Then to Holmeswell, as you may remember, he behaved shamefully! When Lady Adelaide North was going to marry Beaconsfield, after having refused Cress (just as if the Maunderwells would have heard of her marrying Cressingham—a fellow without rank or connexion), he insisted upon Holmeswell's booking up a few hundreds he owed him (a loan forced upon him by Cress at Oxford); and poor Holmeswell had the deuce's own work to make up the sum, without calling upon his father;—who just then, you know, marrying his daughter, and so forth, would not have found it agreeable to stump up."

"How blackguard!" cried Lord Robert Leigh, not troubling himself to recollect the real version of the affair, of which he had been a witness. "Well! I'm afraid one must give Cress up. It's

a monstrous pity,—for really that house in Hamilton Place was pleasant enough at times, and very near being the right thing."

"Ay! but that, *à peu près*, is what spoils all that is not the right thing in this world!" retorted Gerald. "Cress wanted tact,—the one thing needful to a man like him,—and his house wanted *ton*. Cress thought that a man's way, if paved with gold, was as sure as the North road; and so, you see, he laid it on so plaguy thick, that he left none for the man who was to walk over it—no uncommon case. And after all, you know, Cress was *not* a man of fortune. I don't call an estate worth having, in which one has only a life interest."

"I saw from the first he was in a fair way to be ruined; but I never thought he would turn out a shirking fellow!"—was the Parthian blow of Morton, who was many hundreds in debt to the absentee; while for Lord Robert Leigh, Cressingham had engaged his name in bill transactions to an amount that had still to be determined.

Such was the fate of the Heir with many friends, and thus was the good name of the prodigal whispered away!—The fashionable world

talked of him as an extinct meteor—the foolish fellow who had done so many preposterous things last season, and was now gone to the dogs; and the sentence once circulated, was final. The fashionable world thinks, feels, and acts in coteries, as regularly as troops are manœuvred in regiments and brigades;—and had Cress even possessed a friend, his single protest would have gone for nothing.

The secluded life led by poor Mrs Blair, meanwhile, fortunately prevented her from becoming cognizant of his disgrace. It was sufficient mortification for the mother of that only son, that every day, the newspapers rang with the name of her nephew, while the closed up windows and weedy lawn of the Hall attested the nothingness of his cousin. *He* was away. *He* was over the sea. Mothers of less fortunate sons were so happy as to enjoy the presence of their offspring; while *her* hours of solitary suffering were fated to be unsoothed by the hand of affection. But of the few who shared with her servants the task of varying her monotonous day, there was no one cruel enough to repeat the rumour circulated in the neighbourhood of Stoke Paddocks by

the neighbours still honoured by the notice of the honourable member for Llanstephen, that Reginald had found it *convenient* to leave the country.

Justina, who, though scarcely more than fifteen in age, was a woman in reason, noticed with pleasure, that in Reginald's letters from abroad, which she was admitted to the privilege of reading to his mother, he was careful to dwell upon the improvement of his health from the early hours and sober habits of continental life, as the surest means of reconciling her to his absence. For she knew that such an argument would suffice. After all, nothing was so natural as his tour; and Mrs Blair might be pardoned her implicit belief that her son was improving himself by a survey of foreign countries, and would soon return to settle permanently in his own. With her usual amiable faculty of finding all things for the best, on learning that Reginald was to pass the winter at Naples, she actually decided that it was just as well he should absent himself from Stoke during the prevalence of the unpopularity produced by his election despotism; which had produced such injurious results, that no one could be found to take the

vacant farms of the tyrant of Stoke Paddocks, and they consequently remained on the hands of his steward, who was little prepared to turn them to account.

Justina did not gainsay the opinion of the poor deceived mother. But *she*, poor girl, heard enough at the vicarage of Reginald's crimes and misdemeanours !—The absentee was made accountable for the illness and discontent of the poor old man, who, moping by his fireside, lamenting over the estrangement of his country neighbours consequent upon his obsequious devotion to his patron, ascribed the fault to Reginald rather than to himself; while the melancholy Drench seemed to consider that the abstraction of Athanasius Docket from his whist club was equally attributable to the nefarious proceedings of the young Man of Fortune.

In a neighbourhood so unincidental, two such events as the closing of the Hall and the emigration of the attorney were fertile topics of discussion; and, as if it were necessary to espouse the partisanship of either the ward or guardian, as Athanasius was now a man in authority, an M. P., nay, a valuable, active, plodding, work-a-

day member,—one of the darlings of the Carlton Club, while Reginald was nothing,—an absentee,—a ruined man,—likely to sell his livings and neglect his apothecary's bill,—they were all but unanimous in elevating their worthy friend Docket to the seventh heaven, and depressing his victim to its antipodes.

There was, indeed, much to command the admiration of the vulgar in the steady ascent of the attorney. Like the mob, who, though they have witnessed the gradual inflation of a balloon, cannot restrain their wonder on seeing it mount into the clouds, they were full of surprise to find their quondam cater-cousin figuring at levees and dining at political dinners, like any other pillar of the senatorial temple. They would have been still more amazed could they have been made to understand the influence exercised by his activity of mind and body, his habits of business, and steadiness of deportment. If not somebody, he was something;—for a man conversant with the law, who comes into public life in the full maturity of his talents, unhampered by public antecedents or family connexions—who has given no

pledges and accepted no favours,—is inestimable to a party.

The name of Athanasius Docket, Esq., M.P., already figured as governor of divers charitable and scientific associations, as well as in the Court Guide as owner of a town mansion in Duke Street, Westminster, and a country seat called Grove House, Llanstephen, N. W. He was understood to possess considerable property in mines; and a man possessed of property in mines, is regarded as a sort of Fortunatus whose riches it is useless to compute. Difficult, it certainly is; and such had probably been his cautious motive for investing in a manner so inostensible, the accumulation of his thrifty servitude to the successive tyrants of Stoke Paddocks.—No one was able to point out the extent of his possessions, so accurately as to excite surmises concerning the honesty of their origin.

All that the world discerned in him was a steady, plodding, hard-headed lawyer, toryfied by the possession of landed property, who had been driven from the agency of the Cressingham estates by his abhorrence of the profligacy, personal and

political, of the young crocodile so strangely hatched under his barn-yard wing; and so useful was he on committees, so undauntable by files of papers or the thick-headedness of country gentlemen, so unshackled by private engagements, and so willing and able to do every one's business as well as his own,—that in the course of his first session, not a leading man of the party but solicited his acquaintance, gave him dinners and all the trouble in their power; and it was impossible to be more surely in the way to a baronetcy and the hand of some decayed spinster of quality.

If anything were wanting to confirm his odour of sanctity in his old neighbourhood, it might have been found in the increasing disorder of the Stoke Paddocks estates. For some time, the old steward and his subordinates had laboured to keep matters together, and fight against the unpopularity and disorderliness of their young master. But when such people as Snapper and Co. were set in authority over them,—when the extortions practised upon them rendered it impossible to do justice to the estate,—when the most ruinous levies were made upon the timber, and all seemed devoted to waste and ruin, they retreated in shame

and disgust, to make way for the disreputable successors provided by the capital fellow in Gray's Inn.

All was now riot and abuse. Messrs Snapper and Co. seemed to consider it absurd that, because the penniless Man of Fortune was amusing himself with sailing in the Bay of Naples, his pheasants should remain unshot, his rivers unfished, his venison uneaten;—and if there were increased difficulty in finding tenants for his farms, there was none whatever in wasting the substance they provided.

Could the ghost of Sir Giles Cressingham have surveyed, from beneath his favourite beech-tree, the goings on at Stoke, the ignominious race of retainers which supplied the place of his respectable janissaries, and the wild and shaggy condition of his beautiful seat, he would probably have lamented the ill-judging perversity which had caused him to alienate his inheritance from his legal successor, in favour of a boy whose childhood he had taken no pains to surround with efficient advisers.

CHAPTER XIII.

A form of light, like some good influence
Haunting the precincts of that sad old place.

VANE

It would be difficult to imagine anything more closely resembling the field of the sluggard, than was now presented by the domain of Stoke Paddocks. The only implement busy there was the axe. Its fine timber lay cumbering the ground; while the weeds in the ill-farmed fields seemed towering to supply the place of the fallen oaks and elms of more provident centuries.

Still, nature protects her own; and whether the park-keepers were few or many, the old thorn trees persisted in blossoming in their appointed season, and the gorse and broom around them were as golden, and the herbage as thymy, as

ever. Though the closely shuttered windows of the hall imparted a ghastly look, as though the owner lay dead, nothing could exceed the loveliness of the fair landscape.

The few strangers who visited the spot to admire the beauty of sites whose charm was unalienable, even by the folly of the owner, used to note meanwhile with wonder, amid those solitary glades and broomy knolls, a fair girl ever wandering there, as if without aim or object, like some Hamadryad left shelterless by the destruction of her verdant home. Amid those lonely scenes, gathering beauty and wisdom into her soul from so intimate an inter-communion with the works of nature, Justina, whose life at the vicarage was a weary one, spent the greater share of her summer hours in strolling about the venerable place, endeared by a thousand early associations.

The poor old Vicar, peevish and infirm, was often so impatient of the presence of his granddaughter, that his wife promoted more than ever her daily visits to The Wilderness, where they were so truly acceptable; and as the vicarage lay at one extremity of the park, and the garden gate of Mrs Blair at the other, nothing was easier than

for Justina to loiter by the way, prolonging her ramblings through every quarter of the extensive park. In her simple white gown, — her pure young face beaming with intelligence,—her movements replete with natural grace,—she might have been mistaken for the guardian genius of the place,—albeit its condition showed little to attest the providence of her guardianship.

Justina was now just entering her sixteenth year; — and but for the solitary and studious nature of her life, would have been light-hearted as other girls of that happy age. But everything to which she was attached was fated to convey saddening impressions. An orphan from her infancy, the old people of whom she was the only surviving relative, thought they were doing enough for her by laying up three-fourths of their income for her sake, without conceiving that a more enlivening existence than their dull parlour might be advantageous to her mind and health;— and though this early seclusion was so far advantageous that it compelled her to have recourse for companionship to books, and books of a nature more grave than usually fall into the hands of girls not brought up in an old-fashioned country

parsonage, it produced a singular influence upon her mind and disposition. But for those grave and ripening studies, the girl would have become a visionary; but for her lonely rambles among the venerable groves and musky gardens of the Hall, too severely matter-of-fact. She knew nothing of what is called the world; for the ten or twenty persons of her acquaintance were almost as distinct from that well-drilled assemblage as if belonging to another sphere; and the deer, to whom the voice and step of their daily visitant were now so familiar that, forgetting their wildness, they came to her to be caressed, were far more of companions to the high-minded girl than such people as the twaddling apothecary of Mrs Blair, or even his feeble patient.

Still, there were qualities in the invalid at The Wilderness that greatly endeared her to Justina. Her gentle voice and lady-like manners had been the first indication of a world more refined than that of her humdrum circle; and to admiration, in process of time, gratitude succeeded. As a child, the little orphan of the vicarage had been accepted as a plaything; and as she advanced in girlhood, a thousand acts of womanly kindness,—

gifts of books,—instruction in music and drawing,—attached her to the mild recluse who, in the recreation of her company, strove to forget the absence of her son.

And still, amid all their lessons, their talk was of Reginald. If Mrs Blair had a good trait to relate of him, she confided it to Justina; or whenever the little girl indulged in reminiscences of those early days, when the schoolboy had been so fond of the child, she seemed to feel that it was only his mother who would deign to believe that the rich Cressingham of Stoke Paddocks was the same Reginald Blair who had printed alphabets for her instruction, or made cowslip balls for her delight.

By degrees, Justina became almost as a daughter to the sick woman, whose shyness and debility of nature brought her down almost to the level of her youthful companion. Both profited by the connexion; the girl, in acquiring elegance of manners beyond what even the refinement of nature imparted by her peculiar life and studies, might have attained;—the woman, in the gentle sympathy of one who loved her as the nearest approach to anything she had ever known of a mother. For the good lady at the vicarage

was a bustling, fussy body, much more intent upon her household affairs and village duties than upon fostering the affections and faculties of her son's orphan; and felt that in keeping her from chilblains in winter and overheating herself in summer, she was showing more kindness than by listening to nonsensical histories of hawthorn hedges or squirrels' nests.

It was consequently from the fair-faced valetudinarian, wrapt in her white India shawl, in the corner of her quiet chintz sofa, that Justina received the daily kiss,—the pat upon the shoulder,—the reproving or approving smile,—and all the matronly caresses which keep up the holier tendernesses of filial life between mother and child. At The Wilderness, she was sure of a kind word, let whatever would betide. If sometimes out of spirits, Mrs Blair was never out of humour. Chastened in the school of adversity by the events of her early widowhood, she had never laid aside the humility of nature engendered by her hours of sorrow; and was, in fact, as grateful for the little girl's affection, as if she had never earned it by acts of favour and forbearance.

Sweet is love-service to such a friend!—Justina

would have blushed for herself had she allowed even her favourite rambles over the soft moss in summer, or crisp snow in winter, to interfere with her attendance on her partial protectress; and when her grandmother, who, too old for much sympathy in her pursuits, hinted that, since it disturbed the good Doctor's nap after dinner to hear her turning over the pages of the book with which she solaced their dull evenings, she might go and dine or drink tea with Mrs Blair whenever she pleased, the offer was readily accepted.

Sad, therefore, was the event to Reginald's mother, even beyond the common sympathies of neighbourship and good will, when a second paralytic seizure, by suddenly carrying off the Vicar, threatened to deprive her of her young companion. She knew that, thenceforth, Justina's time must be devoted to the old lady, and that the old lady must speedily make way at the vicarage for the successor long since provided by the foresight of Messrs Snapper and Co.; and as it was already rumoured that the good Doctor, who, whatever treasures he might have been laying up in Heaven, had laid up in the land where moth and rust do corrupt no less a sum than 38,000*l.* for the benefit of

his widow and their future representative, Mrs Blair entertained little doubt that Mrs Chaffles, with so good an income, would hasten to Bath or London, for the sake of more cheerful associations for Justina.

But the widow of the vicarage belonged to a century which was wise enough to hold that the pleasures of youth ought to be subservient to the comforts of age; and had no mind to uproot herself from a soil in which she had so long flourished.

She had become part and parcel of the neighbourhood of Stoke. Stoke was her home. She knew the village by heart. Having seen the young people born, and the old people young, she cared more about *them* than about any other people, young or old; and though she was no longer privileged to provide them broths when sick, or flannel when rheumatic, she would not deny herself the satisfaction of at least walking through the village, and being curtseyed to, whenever the weather and her pattens permitted.

The modest mansion inhabited by the honourable member for Llanstephen while the plumage of his new dignities was still unfledged, was fortunately still vacant, at the distance of little more

than a mile from the village. Thither, the widow determined to bend her steps; and from the gratitude evinced by Justina when the decision was announced to her, it might have been surmised that *her* wishes alone had been consulted in the selection.

Now, however, were her trials to commence! even those trials of temper indispensable to perfect every woman's vocation upon earth. The old lady, whose time had been so fully occupied by her duties as a wife and a Lady Bountiful that it was a relief to her to find the leisure of Justina bestowed elsewhere, now discovered (the new Vicaress having evinced considerable jealousy of her interference in the village) that there was scarcely a moment in the day in which she could dispense with her granddaughter's society. Even after the poor girl had devoted whole mornings to sorting her flower-seeds, cataloguing her books, or copying out recipes, the fussy old lady would not hear of an evening visit to The Wilderness, now that Mrs Blair's pony chaise or her own must be in requisition for the purpose. No sooner, in short, did she perceive the girl's earnest desire to persist in her attentions to her kind friend, than

she grew so jealous as to make every visit a matter of pain and grief to all parties.

Still, with grateful forbearance and grateful consistency, Justina steered her way between both, with as little offence as possible; made no reply when reproached with the noble fortune laid up for her by those towards whom she evinced no natural affection; and answered only by a gentle kiss on the hand of the invalid, when assured that by proper management, she might certainly come oftener. She never rebelled—never murmured; —too grateful to Providence for having fixed her so near her old home to resent the caprices to which she was subjected. The terrors which had seized her mind on Mrs Blair's suggestion that her grandmother would probably settle in town, or at some watering place, had made her clearly understand all the value she affixed to the beloved haunts of her childhood, and all the torture of bidding them adieu.

Moreover she fancied that, when *she* was gone, there would be no one left to love them!—Not a single being connected with the old Hall seemed to take note of the bursting of its vernal verdure, or the reddening of its autumnal tints.—

No soul but herself ever now pushed out the little pleasure boat on the lake, to delight in the surrounding scenery;—no one sauntered through the entangled shrubberies;—no one heeded how the flowers grew wild, or the song-birds increased.

There were certain old trees to which she attached a sense of companionship, under which Reginald had made a sylvan home for her and her toys in childhood; or where, in riper years, she had first turned a page of Shakspeare, or dwelt enraptured over the more earnest inspirations of Wordsworth — inspirations such as her own heart had found in the running brooks and green forests, her sole companions.—And these, she fancied, would be sacrificed, like the rest, after her departure!—The red cross would be marked upon her own old oak,—the oak under which she had watched every morning as a child for the first opening of the garden gate of The Wilderness, for Reginald to come out and play. It was something to keep her eye upon her own oak, even though the influence which assigned its first charm had departed!—

For some time past, however, her associations with the oak had been growing more satisfactory.

The letters now addressed to Mrs Blair by her son, savoured far more of Reginald, and far less of Pine-apple Fritters Cressingham. There was more truthfulness in his expressions, more reality in his kindness. He seemed *really* eager for her health and welfare,—really glad to find that Mrs Chaffles had fixed herself in the neighbourhood; and that little Tina, as he still called her, was so great a comfort to the invalid. Unaware that even his own correspondence passed through "little Tina's" hands, he expressed his heart-felt delight on hearing that she was so well provided for by her grandfather.

"The precarious nature of Tina's prospects had often made me anxious," wrote he. "For though, with such fine preferment, it seemed easy for old Chaffles to insure his life, or something of that kind, for his grandchild's benefit, my own extravagance and carelessness in money-matters have led me to expect no better from other people; and the first thing that occurred to me, on learning from my man of business that the living of Stoke had fallen in, was how I could decently offer some sort of provision to the widow and grandchild; though, if I am to believe Messrs Snapper and Co., the involved

state of my affairs might have rendered it difficult!"—

The kind intention of her old playmate was not thrown away on the grateful girl; and she could have wrung her hands for very bitterness when, that very evening, on taking refuge under her own oak, and diverting her eyes from the green laurel hedge overtopping the garden paling of The Wilderness towards the grim-looking desolate old Hall, —she felt how little interest was maintained by either his old home or his new in the eyes of their owner;—how little they had profited by *him*, or he by *them!*

Little as she knew of worldly business, it was clear to Justina, from Mr Cressingham's letters, that though in some degree aware of the unsatisfactory nature of the parties to whom his affairs were intrusted, he was too deeply involved to extricate himself without more exertion and greater self-denial than could be expected from either his nature or education. She saw that the evils which had arisen from his recklessness were, through his inertness, increasing in magnitude;—nor was it possible to warn him of all that was going on upon the estate during his absence.

Justina could address him only through his mother, who, suffering from a disease of the heart, was not to be agitated by anxiety or evil tidings without danger.—Nay, even *had* she taken courage to insinuate something nearer the truth to Mrs Blair than had yet come to her knowledge, there was every probability that Reginald would turn a deaf ear to her suggestions; for upon the old Vicar's once presuming to hint at the irregularities of the new steward, he had received a harsh rebuff from his patron, who accused him of being the partizan of Docket, and blinded in his favour to disparage the new man of business.

Thus was poor Justina condemned to the vexation of witnessing in silence the devastation of the property; and hearing, without possibility of affording aid, the murmurs of the tenants. She beheld all, as in a dream, without the power of interference.—Frank as her childhood had been towards her playmate, nay, frank as her girlhood had been towards the rich Cressingham, at all risks of offending and estranging him, something of a woman's mistrust now came over her, forewarning her that it was not for *her* to address the wayward exile touching the disposal of his affairs.—

Still, it lessened her joy in the growing rationality of the pursuits his letters described, to feel that others were executing in his name all the follies he had formerly executed for himself; that while he spoke of his rides on the shores of the Bosphorus and modest establishment at Pera, the house in Hamilton Place remained undisposed of; nor, till a report reached the country through the Duke of Granton's family, that a fashionable auctioneer had announced the probability of his having in the course of the following spring the Stoke Paddocks gallery, more especially a celebrated pair of family portraits by Holbein, to dispose of, did Justina become desperate.

Notwithstanding Reginald's lukewarm pride in the Cressinghams, as of female descent, she could not suppose him capable of disposing for money of such sacred family relics as portraits by Holbein, unless on the brink of ruin; and on this occasion actually ventured to address to him a letter of remonstrance.

The result was as she had anticipated. He had no part in a project so barbarous; and on receiving her letter, sent a bitter reproof to Snapper and Co. for having permitted such rumours to get

wind. He had once said to them in jest, " Money I must have—and if I cannot mortgage my estate, I can at least sell my plate and pictures;"—but it was in the same reckless spirit of menace in which he would have talked of selling the ashes of his ancestors out of the family vault.—

The letter containing this intelligence conveyed unspeakable comfort to the heart of Justina. Forced to address in the tone of a reasonable being the young companion with whom he had hitherto dealt as with a wayward and insignificant child, Reginald could not refrain from adding a few grateful words touching her devotedness to his mother. He even solemnly recommended Mrs Blair to her continued attention;—adding, in a few illegible words, that, since his own disgracefully useless course was fated to afford so little addition to her happiness, it was a comfort to feel that she had found a daughter where she was less entitled to expect solace and affection.

Again and again, was this letter perused by the young admonitress of Mr Cressingham; and long was it worn near her heart, as if affording sufficient compensation for all the vexatious hours she had endured in consequence of her consistent attend-

ance on her friend at The Wilderness. But it did not decrease her anxieties on Reginald's account to perceive that he gave himself up as a lost case;—that he still wanted the energy and self-reliance which might have enabled him, even now, to start forth in his own defence, assume a more appropriate position in the world, and command, by higher purposes and steady conduct, the respect he had been unable to purchase by prodigality of gold.

She could not, however, again address the absentee. It was not for a girl of her age to establish a correspondence with a young man of his; and all the result of her altered state of feeling towards him was a tone of deeper interest in reading aloud his letters to his mother, and milder interpretation of all she saw and heard concerning his faults and follies.

"You are not quite so harsh in your way of talking about my poor Reginald as you used to be," observed Mrs Blair, as she was wishing her good night, after an evening which, by special favour of her grandmother, she had been permitted to spend at The Wilderness, a few weeks after the arrival of *the* letter from the Levant—"You speak *now* as if you almost thought he might some day

come back an altered man, to settle down happily at home!"—

"God grant it!" replied Justina, bending down to receive on her forehead the kiss imprinted there at every parting by her adopted mother.

"What a doubly happy day would it be to me," added Mrs Blair with a smile, "could I only hope that the two old playmates would take a fancy to each other,—and my dearest Tina become my daughter indeed!"

Tears swam in the eyes of the girl who was receiving these affectionate adieus; but she instantly checked them.

"If Mr Cressingham could but hear you utter such humiliating insinuations!"—cried she, "Mr Cressingham so haughty,—so supercilious,—I will not say *proud*,—for in such a station as his proper pride appears to me becoming,—do you imagine that the three years he has been away have so changed him as to make him think the girl he despised as a child compared with himself,—as ill-born and obscurely educated,—grown worthy to be the wife of Cressingham of Stoke Paddocks?"—

"It is from the change of my own opinions that

I have learned to hope for an alteration in *his*. Time was, my dearest child, that even *I* was anxious my son should make a brilliant connexion; I was pleased when the newspapers announced that he was to marry Lady Adelaide North; and conceived that, with Reginald's fortune, he was entitled to match with the aristocracy. But now, I would rather have my little Tina for a daughter-in-law, than any duke's daughter in the land. There is no reason he should not have become as much wiser as myself."

"Beware, at all events, of allowing Mr Cressingham to surmise such a project," cried Justina, laughingly, as she quitted the room, "or you will be having him turn Turk and settle in a kiosk for the remainder of his days, in dread of returning to the Hall!"

The bloom painted upon her cheek by these startling allusions, had scarcely subsided when Justina arrived at home. But it was not to be of long continuance. She saw in a moment that her grandmother had disagreeable news to communicate, connected, in some way or other, with the family at once the object of her deference and

animosity. The fussy old lady was big with momentous tidings.

"And pray, my dear, how did your poor friend bear this dreadful affair?" said she, as soon as her granddaughter entered the room. "I'm sure I quite trembled when I heard it, to think what the consequence might be to that poor shattered frame of hers!—though I can't bring myself to believe her in the sort of precarious condition which poor Mr Drench chooses to fancy. It seems to me that people who have been ten years and more a-dying, may go on dying for ten years to come."

"But *what* has occurred, dear grandmamma, to make you more anxious than usual on poor Mrs Blair's account?" demanded Justina.

"Nothing *very* particular, my dear,—only this execution! To be sure, there never *was* anything so dreadful!" faltered the old lady, raising her eyes and hands to Heaven,—almost sincerely.

"*What* execution?" persisted Justina, beginning to be agitated in her turn.

"Why, is it possible, my love, that you have

not heard?—There is an execution put in at the Hall, and the sheriff's officers have been in possession since the afternoon!"

Justina rushed to the bell.—She hoped to be in time to stop Mrs Blair's pony chair.

"What on earth are you going to do, Justina?" cried the old lady, perceiving that she was tying on her bonnet.

"Return to The Wilderness if the carriage be not gone," said she. "Mrs Blair will die, should this sad news be hastily communicated to her.—At present she knows nothing.—Oh! if I could only reach her in time!"

"My dear, no one would be so cruel as to tell her such a thing," said the old lady, not a little relieved to find from the servant that the carriage had been gone ten minutes. "Besides, I really cannot have you running about the country at this time of night."

"Dear grandmamma, you yourself seemed to think it impossible, just now, but that the news should have already reached her. Her servants will have learned it here. Reflect upon the consequences!"

"No,—I warned John and Mary to be on their

guard, in case the thing should not have transpired. No one can possibly see poor Mrs Blair to-night; and in the morning, you may visit her as early as you please."—

With this permission, the anxious girl was forced to content herself, as she retired to her sleepless pillow;—and in the silence of the night, painful indeed was it to contemplate the disgrace brought by Reginald upon the threshold of the ancient family of which he was the unworthy representative. — In a thousand forms, with a thousand forebodings, did she consider the matter.—There was but one chamber in Mrs Blair's abode that commanded a view of the Hall; at the windows of which, during Reginald's absence aforetime, the fond mother had loved to sit and contemplate the brightness of the setting sun reflected upon the multiplicity of windows of the old pile. Even for some time after his departure for the continent, she found enjoyment in the contemplation. It was Reginald's roof,—it was Reginald's home on which she was gazing, and there was a soothing influence in the sight.

But when, amid the altered fortunes of the place, it became only too evident that Stoke Pad-

docks was deserted by its master, she ordered the windows to be closed, and the room was abandoned.

That very morning, however, by one of those instincts that seem to connect our destinies with some vague and mysterious influence whose import is equally inscrutable with the Higher will that "shapes our ends," Mrs Blair had taken it into her head to repair to the room, and station herself at the forbidden window, leaning upon the arm of Justina. *She* ascribed the caprice to the yearning of a house-ridden heart after a more extensive landscape than was afforded by her view of the garden of The Wilderness, brightened by the revivifying influence of spring. But Justina was now persuaded that some deeper hidden impulse had produced her sudden interest in the spot she had so long dreaded to contemplate.—

"Thank Heaven," murmured the kind-hearted girl, as she vainly attempted to dismiss the recollection from her mind,—"Thank Heaven, that, while she stood there, leaning on my shoulder, indulging in such happy visions for the future, she was spared all conjecture of the afflicting

event fated to form the climax of her mortifications."

At an earlier hour than any other in the village of Stoke was astir, Justina ascertained that the claim asserted by the sheriff's officers was a bond amounting to eleven hundred pounds, for which Reginald had made himself responsible for Lord Robert Leigh, at the period when the Tyrant of Stoke Paddocks still rejoiced in the name of the Heir and many friends.

It was some comfort to find that no *new* imprudence was the cause of the evil; and she consequently took courage to hasten to the house of Mr Drench, who was co-executor with her grandmother of the will of the late Vicar, with an earnest entreaty that, from a sum of two thousand pounds to which, by virtue of her father's settlements, she was entitled at the age of fourteen, he would satisfy the demand, and prevent the transaction from coming to the knowledge of his patient at The Wilderness.

"Believe me, I run no risk of losing my money," pleaded she, on his flat refusal to sanction an act so preposterous.—"You cannot doubt

Mr Cressingham's eagerness to repay me, the moment this disgraceful business comes to his knowledge."

"I am very far from certain of his ability," replied the prudent apothecary, "and take my word for it, the service you propose would defeat its own purpose. Other executions would follow, in the hope of similar interposition. Rest yourself easy, my dear young lady. Nothing can be done, but to keep the circumstance from the knowledge of Mrs Blair. You might as well stand on Westminster Bridge, and try to arrest the course of the Thames, as pretend to stop the ruin and discredit of Reginald Cressingham."

Vainly did Justina reiterate her importunities. Drench stood firm, and their argument was at length interrupted by a summons to him to hasten instantly to The Wilderness.

"I am afraid this abominable business has transpired," cried he, acceding to Justina's request to bear him company, "in which case Mrs Blair will never hold up her head again."

She never did! — The event, which the imprudence of servants had betrayed to her knowledge, had already struck her death-blow; and

the service required of the apothecary was to restore her to consciousness after a long swoon, from which she was with difficulty recovered, and only to relapse into insensibility.

"Tell him I forgave him!"—were the first rational words she uttered, when at length aware that it was in the arms of her adopted daughter she was so tenderly supported.

"You will see him again and again, to express your own feelings," answered Justina, comprehending all that was comprised in her words. "At present, you are overcome by this sad shock.—You will soon, very soon, be better——"

"*Never!*" replied Mrs Blair, in a hoarse whisper. "I have borne much suffering.—*All* these silent years of mine, have been years of suffering,—years of self-reproach. This last blow has only proved the over-brimming drop in my cup of sorrow."

"At some future time you will experience relief from having been forced to lay aside the mask you must have often found so oppressive," replied her young friend. "When all this is over, dearest Mrs Blair, you will be more at peace than before."

"It cannot be *over*.—Such stains are indelible,"

replied the sufferer, waving her head. "And it is all my doing, Justina. It is *I* who am the cause of poor Reginald's ruin. I courted riches for him. As a child, I accepted dependence for him in the house of a cruel, heartless man.—When he attained the object of my desires, I seemed to worship him the more,—worship my only son the more—that he was rich and great; and, instead of checking his faults, or attempting to mature his judgment, gave way to all his caprices, and allowed him to grow up in utter hardness of heart!—The hardening influence of money destroyed him. As you once said to me, Justina, Reginald was encased from his boyhood in a coat of golden armour, that seemed to prevent all expansion of his natural qualities.—Oh! my poor son!"—

"Compose yourself, dearest friend," remonstrated Justina, terrified by the wildness of her eye and huskiness of her voice.

"Have I not said that I have forgiven him?" rejoined Mrs Blair. "If you love me, Justina, pray in your turn, that GOD may forgive *me!*"

It was useless to attempt to lead her to any other train of thought. She was dying,—she knew it,—dying with the home of her only son, within

view of her dwelling, in possession of the assertors of the law!

"There is one among the family possessions," faltered the conscience-struck mother, as she became aware of the yet nearer approach of death, —"which even *he* has not been able to expose to shame.—See me laid in the family vault, Justina. Should he ever return, tell him it was *there* I took refuge from the publicity of his disgrace."

She never spoke again.—Vainly was she questioned by the apothecary and exhorted by the new Vicar; nay, vainly was she caressed with tears of tenderest sympathy by her adopted child. —Her irradiated features betokened joy as she listened to the assuaging words of the priest of her faith,—her yearning eyes expressed grateful affection towards one who had been unto her as a daughter. But ever and anon, her eyes wandered with a terrified glance towards the door of her chamber, as though in expectation of some outrage from the intrusion of the minions of the law. Her mind, perhaps, was already wandering.—Better so!—There can be no comfort for the death-bed of a mother tormented by the misdoings of a graceless child.

Justina did not quit her a moment.—In vain was she recalled home by mandates of authority; and in vain did the medical man, after a whole day's watching beside the dying woman, insist that his young friend should desist from a duty beyond her years and strength.—Justina stood beside her pillow to the last,—wiped away the dews from her forehead,—fanned her fainting form,—and at length closed the eyes, whose fixed, unconscious gaze proclaimed that the world contained a sufferer the less.—

"She has been a mother to *me*, and I will do by her the duty of a daughter!"—said she, in reply to every remonstrance; nor, till the limbs of her friend had been arrayed for the grave, and the coffin lid was closed over her remains, did she prepare to quit the house.—

Just as she was departing from the chamber of death, her tearful face muffled in her cloak, and her soul stifled with grief, a stranger appeared at the door from which she was departing.—Justina recoiled with horror.—Recalling to mind the terrors of Mrs Blair lest some insult should be offered to her in her last moments, as it now appeared she had more than once undergone

during her life-time, she fancied that the intruder must be connected with the disgraceful business at the Hall.

His mode of address, however, instantly dispelled her fears.—She had ceased to doubt that he was a gentleman, even before, with earnest apologies for his intrusion, he announced himself to be Richard Cressingham.

"A rumour of what was going on at Stoke Paddocks having reached me at my place in Berkshire, where I was spending the Easter holidays," said he, in explanation of his visit, "I hastened hither to do a kinsman's part by relieving the family and the family place from a stigma, absolutely the result of ill-will and mischief on the part of those employed to act for the absent owner.—All I meditated was to pay off the claim:—I was not advised that a more painful duty awaited me here towards my unfortunate aunt."

"Would that you had arrived in time to soothe her last anxieties by proving that her son still possessed a friend," replied Justina, with a heavy sigh;—"for her death was as devoid of consolation as her life of offence."—

With the kindest deference towards the feelings

of one who, though so young, so almost a child, evinced the wisest self-possession in the midst of her afflictions, Mr Cressingham proceeded to state his intention of remaining at Stoke till after the funeral, which the instructions of Reginald's man of business had appointed indecently soon, in order to obtain earlier possession of The Wilderness; and it was a comfort to Justina to feel that, in Reginald's absence, she was to be countenanced in her last melancholy tribute of respect to the dead, by one whose name commanded such general respect as that of the member for Wilsbury.—

The funeral took place;—and as the procession passed through the park, the first gloomy array of death which had figured there since the gorgeous funeral of Sir Giles Cressingham,—Justina felt a daughter's pride in observing that her benefactress was speeded to her resting-place by the lamentations of the poor; while of the hard-hearted man of fortune, not a single human tear had moistened the pall.—She was grateful too that, as the coffin containing the wasted form of that suffering mother was borne past the old Hall, no dishonouring presence brought the scoffer and

the hireling to gaze upon her obsequies. — A tearful glance towards the grave kinsman of Mrs Blair, as the funeral glided before the portico towards the little church containing the family monuments of his race, conveyed her thankfulness for his interposition !—

CHAPTER XIV.

Show me the grave
That I have brought her to. Let me weep there
Till Death himself have pity.

FLETCHER.

A FEW weeks after these distressing events, Justina was loitering, after evening service, in the old church, leaning against the marble balustrade of the monument of a Sir Reginald de Cressingham, beside which was the entrance to the family vault, and musing with many a grievous retrospection upon the sorrows of her whom she had recently seen consigned to that cheerless dwelling, — sorrows all the more bitter for the fond maternal pride which had kept them so long unacknowledged; when a travel-worn, haggard man hurried along the aisle, and threw himself upon the stones of the sepulchre.

That it was Reginald, she could not entertain a doubt; though his dishevelled appearance bore little trace of the fine gentleman of other days; and respecting his anguish, she quietly withdrew from the spot, without venturing to address him.

On arriving, however, at the stile leading from the churchyard towards the Vicarage, it occurred to her that such remorse as must, or ought to be that of Reginald Cressingham, could not be devoid of danger. He was now the murderer of his mother, as before of his own good name; and she fancied that he might rush upon self-destruction as a refuge from the consciousness of his double crime. Retracing her steps, therefore, Justina sat anxiously down in the porch of the old church, and listened, moan by moan, sob by sob, to the tortures of the penitent; until a sudden cessation of his cries suggesting a renewal of her alarm, she hurried back into the chancel, and found him extended, faint and exhausted, on the ground, while the marble effigies standing around, seemed to survey with scorn these bootless tortures of the weakling, the last of their race. Sympathizing in his desolate condition, Justina now drew towards him, took his hand in hers, to whisper

the words of comfort and forgiveness she had gathered from the lips of his dying mother.

"She forgave you and blessed you before she died,"—repeated Justina again and again; and in time, the soothing words were of due effect. By degress Reginald was able to explain and question in his turn. He had started from the East on the first intimation of an execution having been put into his house,—a sufficient intimation of the unworthiness of the hands to which his affairs were committed, since four years of retrenchment had done so little to extricate them from involvement. But for the cruel intelligence which greeted him the moment he set foot in London he had been utterly unprepared; nor was it till, a few hours afterwards, he made his way to Stoke, he could believe in the reality of that terrible bereavement. So long as his mother survived, there had seemed comfort for him,—hope for him. There was nothing now, and he rushed from The Wilderness to her grave, as if eager to crush both soul and body against the stone that parted him from the dead.

The presence of a mild and patient friend in an hour of affliction so especial, might be accepted

as a token that the mercies of Heaven were not yet wholly withdrawn from one who had taken such small account of its benefits. Justina's gentle voice, her silent forbearance, gradually subdued the frenzy of his affliction. He listened almost with satisfaction to her assurances that for many months preceding his mother's sudden dissolution she had enjoyed better health than usual, and more cheering expectations; that she continually talked of him with undiminished affection; and that the unhappy day preceding her release, could alone be said to have proved a season of distress.

All this was but confirmation of the contents of her letters to her son,—letters so fondly describing the consolation derived from the very friend who now sat beside him as a sister, relating with her usual firm but quiet utterance, the evils whereof he had been the cause, and the untiring motherly love with which they had been endured for his sake.

"And you were her only friend!"—he exclaimed at length, clasping his hands with an expression of utter despair. "But for you, her eyes would have been closed by the hands of menials, and her head laid in a neglected grave!"

"She was not so much on that account an

object of compassion," remonstrated Justina. "The menials, as you call them, who had so long and faithfully attended her, were to *her* as friends. The kind heart of Mrs Blair found comfort in their sympathy. Her death was mourned with respect by all who witnessed her blameless life, and with affection by those humbler friends who had seen her, ill and feeble, attend the deathbed of the faithful old nurse of her son. But other tokens of deference awaited her. The chief mourner at your mother's funeral was a man of the highest importance in the eyes of his countrymen,—your cousin, Mr Cressingham, of Manny Park!"

Reginald started up,—nay, almost recoiled, from the side of his companion.—All that was left in his soul of the leaven of his old pride, rose up against this bitter rebuke.

"Richard Cressingham!" was all he faltered, on hearing the name of one whom he had supplanted in fortune, and who had supplanted *him* in the estimation of the world, by the nobler influence of worth and wisdom. "There needed only this to make me know myself a wretch indeed!——"

"A wretch, indeed, if thus heartless in your

appreciation of the service he has rendered you!" cried Justina. "Reginald, Reginald! it was your cousin who defrayed that dishonouring debt,—it was your cousin who redeemed your house from shame,—it was your cousin who caused the head of your mother to be laid with honour in the grave!"

"And you expect me to forgive him such advantages over me!" retorted the humiliated man, smiting his brows, as they sat together under the old porch overlooking the secluded churchyard which formed almost a portion of his park.

"I scarcely expect you to forgive *yourself* for being the cause of his obtaining them!" was her steady reply. "Nevertheless, if you would still testify your love and veneration for your poor mother's memory,—if you would redeem the name of her forefathers from obloquy,—if you would cease to be a fable and disgrace to all belonging to you, I beseech you, lay aside these jealous repinings! You asked me just now *how* you should ever repay my devotion to your mother. Thus! —Go straight to your cousin.—Seek his advice in all that regards your worldly interests. His

character for wisdom and uprightness ought to satisfy you that you cannot have a safer counsellor; and richly has he earned your confidence by the promptitude of his service."

Reginald Cressingham replied by a heavy groan.

"I know that I am an inert, selfish fool," he replied. "I know that the mismanagement by which my ruin has been completed would disgrace a child.—*Can* I go and throw myself on the contempt of a man like Richard Cressingham by such confessions?"—

"It is the only chance that may enable you to surmount it," persisted Justina. "You are fortunate in having a near kinsman to whose judgment the nation has recourse in its emergencies. Will you be the only one who disdains to seek it?—He extends the olive branch towards you, under circumstances that ought to soften the most obdurate heart. — Can you refuse to accept the pledge?"

Long did Reginald remain absorbed in reflection, and almost sullenly silent.

"Go now,—go at once!" persisted Justina.

"Do not enter your own home till you have come to such a decision as will enable you to restore it and yourself to the position you ought to hold. Proceed straight from the grave of your mother to the presence of him by whose manly sensibility it was hallowed. Forgive me if I speak so resolutely, and in a manner perhaps unbecoming my age and our relative position. But I speak in *her* name,—I speak with *her* feelings !—Could she arise from yonder vault, it would be to implore you to be true to yourself, and honour her memory by your own restoration to happiness and respectability."

Such, often reiterated, but reiterated with all the earnestness of faithful regard, were the expostulations which at length determined the prodigal son to arise and seek the interposition of his cousin. He could not have decided more wisely. Richard Cressingham, from his kinsmanship with the ward of Docket,—the Tyrant of Stoke Paddocks,—the butt of Lord Robert Leigh,—the victim of Snapper and Co.,—had more than once been apprized of villanies connected with the affairs of an estate, of which by many he was sup-

posed to be the heir in tail, and was fully prepared with faith for the grievances of Reginald, and even with data to secure partial redress.

Under his wise and practical counsels, accordingly such measures were adopted for the dismissal of his present men of business and the adjustment of his estate, as inspired even the desponding man with hopes of a gradual extrication.

"Nothing but a degree of wilful blindness, little short of insanity," pleaded the member for Wilsbury, "can account for the manner in which you have suffered yourself to be driven, entanglement by entanglement, into this maze of ruin."

By skilful and persevering investigations, moreover, the clever Cressingham was enabled to trace the early involvements of Reginald to the malversations of his guardian even beyond his surmises. The honourable member for Llanstephen proved to be the real holder of many of those claims upon the property, which had arisen out of advances at an exorbitant rate of interest;—and the dread of exposure such as must have levelled to the dust even *his* well-constructed temple of plausibility, proved the means of enabling the new solicitors to strike out such plans of sure but gradual payment,

as assigned to the proprietor of Stoke Paddocks an income fully enabling him to maintain his family respectability at the Hall.

But from this, the good feeling of Reginald recoiled. He determined to settle at The Wilderness, and cause the old mansion to stand uninhabited, a memento ever before his eyes of his folly and prodigality, till his whole estate should be retrieved.—The Wilderness was enough for happiness;—The Wilderness, hallowed by remembrances of his mother, and sentiments of early friendship, was a home that sufficed his modified ambition.

"And now," said Richard Cressingham, one day, when, many months after their reconciliation, he was putting the finishing stroke to the organization of these projects,—"may I in return for my good offices, my dear Reginald, request your interposition where you seem to hold the influence of a brother?—I am a plain spoken fellow, as becomes one who is too much a man of figures to pretend to be a man of figure. I have long been wanting a wife; without much leisure on my hands for the arduous task of hunting out, in worldly circles, such a companion as would sweeten

my toils as a public man, without finding her own embittered by my gravity. Such a person,—(but in a form, heaven knows, and gifted with superiority of sense and feeling, I had despaired of finding united!) have I found in your village of Stoke. Try therefore, I entreat you, whether you cannot assist me in persuading her to demonstrate her affection for your poor mother, by restoring to the home where Sophia Cressingham first saw the light, all that it has so long wanted of female illustration!"—

Poor Reginald, who was beginning to feel that the one thing wanting to the perfecting of his new projects of happiness, was the hope of recommending himself as a husband to one who had so lightly regarded him as the man of fortune, could scarcely repress a cry of despair as he listened to a demand so well founded; and admitted the impossibility that the hand of the member for Wilsbury should be rejected by so wise a girl as Justina, or a man so well established as Cressingham of Manny Park, by Justina's grandmother.

"You will need no recommendation of mine," said he, in a faltering voice. "A marriage so

perfectly assorted cannot fail to meet the wishes of all parties."

"Nay," replied his cousin,—on whom the tremulous voice and whitening cheek of poor Reginald were not thrown away,—"do not say *all* parties. I see how it is, my dear fellow!—I was not aware of this attachment. I fancied your tastes and predilections of a more worldly nature. I will think no more of the business. Not a word has ever yet escaped my lips to any other than yourself; nor am I young enough, idle enough, or enough in love, to suppose that the world may not contain elsewhere a partner equally suitable for me, whom I may marry without the self-reproach of having broken a tenderer heart than my own."

Reginald, however, was not to be outdone in generosity. He insisted upon laying the wishes of his cousin distinctly and earnestly before one whom they honoured, and whose happiness he knew must be secured by an alliance so unexceptionable. Of his own aspirings,—his own ardent affections,—he uttered not a syllable; nor was it till some time had elapsed after the decided

though grateful refusal of one whose prospects in life rendered her no ineligible match even for the squire of Manny Park, relieved him from his scruples, that Reginald by degrees began to insinuate his ardent desire of converting her long and consistent friendship into a warmer sentiment.

"You used to tell me, dearest Justina, that I should never have a friend;—I have found one in the man I most detested! You used to tell me I should never have an opinion of my own; will you not accept my fervent attachment as a proof to the contrary?" whispered Reginald, as he pressed his suit upon the playmate of his childhood, who listened without any apparent reluctance. But whatever her secret joy at finding herself beloved by one for whom her own affection had grown with her growth, she was not so much the slave of her feelings as to accept the good intentions of Reginald Cressingham as a sufficient assurance of his reformation. His natural instability of character suggested caution. Justina knew that he had been on the point of sacrificing his pride for an interested marriage;—he might, perhaps, feel it a greater sacrifice now, though renounced at a higher instigation. She chose, therefore, to assure

herself by experience whether the alteration of his views and habits were likely to prove permanent, and demanded time for the trial.

The probation, however, was not to be of a very barbarous nature. Residing in the same village, meeting every day of their lives, the two years' engagement on which she insisted as a token of his sincerity, served only to endear to each other two persons worthy of a mutual attachment; and though the death of the Vicar's widow within a year of the period originally appointed for their union, afforded a fair excuse to Justina for accelerating the event, she was firm in requiring that her eighteenth year should be accomplished ere she gave her hand to the object of her first affections. May the docility with which the Tyrant of Stoke Paddocks submitted to the decree of his fair despot, be accepted as sufficient evidence of his amended temper!

The two years wore to an end. — It was a very happy wedding—it promises to be a very happy marriage. Mrs Cressingham, by the devotion of her handsome fortune to the further extrication of the estate of Stoke Paddocks, has earned the gratitude of her husband by placing

him in the all but unencumbered enjoyment of his fine income; and the son and heir born to them last year, saw the light under the roof of the old Hall, in all its former dignity and pride;—when, for the first time, Reginald took part in the rejoicings of the village of Stoke, and heard the bob-majors pealed in his honour. But for the recollection that she who would so fondly have rejoiced in the sound had been deprived by his follies of the enjoyment of a tranquil old age, he would not at that moment have had a sorrow in the world!—

Such people as Lord Holmeswell, Sir Henry Morton, and Bob Leigh, laughed heartily at the announcement of his marriage with the granddaughter of the old Vicar, regarding it as confirmation of their former verdict, that "it was all up with poor Cress!"—But the honourable position now maintained in his county by Cressingham of Stoke Paddocks, and the friendship of a happy circle of good and honourable families, who readily overlooked the early follies of a man, for whose reform no less a person than the member for Wilsbury deigned to stand sponsor, afford all

the society and distinction wanting in former days to the respectability of the family place. Even the houses of Granton and Beaconsfield have discovered, with profit to themselves, that Stoke is within visiting distance.

Athanasius Docket, meanwhile, having fallen into disgrace with his party upon the discovery of his negotiations with government for the governorship of one of the new South Sea Colonies, was thrown out of Parliament at the late election; and is said to be on the point of sailing for Australia, where he has invested a considerable portion of his ill-gotten gains. In England, his career was crushed. He was observed never to hold up his head in the House from the moment he was unable to confront the contemptuous smile of the honourable member for Wilsbury.

The ill-omened old beech-tree of Sir Giles Cressingham has been levelled with the lawn; and all the cogitations of Reginald now occur under the spreading branches of the oak sacred to Justina.—It may consequently be inferred that they are not of a very gloomy nature; and that, under the prudent guidance of such parents, the *present*

"Heir" will become worthy of "many friends;" —and trained in sentiments of honour sobered by honesty, and generosity tempered by prudence, he will, at some future period, accredit the responsible position of a "MAN OF FORTUNE."

END OF VOL. I.

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